Library Form No.

FATHER VIKENTY

About this book

Father Vikenty has been described as "a Don Camillo in the New World". He is in fact an impulsive Russian Orthodox priest with a faithful dog Dragoon, and a passion for wrestling. Trying to guide his extraordinary flock in a new world which he understands very imperfectly, he is a loving and lovable character whose priesthood is more human because he himself has many weaknesses.

Paul Chavchavadze's latest book is written with warmth, wit and tenderness. There are fascinating and vivid portraits of a wonderfully eccentric collection of characters, and Father Vikenty himself is one of those people who are a delight to know and to read about because they are so completely themselves, without any pretensions.

This is in fact one of the most original novels of the season.

Books by
Paul Chavchavadze

Family Album
Mountains of Allah

PAUL CHAVCHAVADZE

Father Vikenty



W. H. ALLEN
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To my wife

Part One

Pages 3–209

Part Two

Pages 213–306

Reference List of Characters

FATHER VIKENTY—Rector of a Russian Orthodox Church in New York City, whose ways may be unorthodox at times but never deviating

Dragoon, his devoted dog

His Church Triumvirate

Ivan Ivánovitch, the warden
Madame Pishnik, Head of the Sisterhood and member of the choir
Miss Katastrófoff, secretary-treasurer

Natasha—Father Vikenty's young parishioner and charge, lovely, vivacious, and marriageable

Johnnie Stone—a young New Yorker who wants to marry Natasha

Boukashóv—recent Soviet delegate, now escaped, whose intentions toward Natasha are possibly less romantic

Yuri Bourkévitch—a young New Yorker of Russian extraction, who aspires to Natasha's hand, but lands in her cousin's lap

Natasha's family

Prince and Princess Tverskóy, her parents
Aunt Dasha and Aunt Ella, her aunts
Sandra, Aunt Ella's daughter
Vava, Natasha's uncle
Nikita, Vava's son
Sergei and Sofka, Aunt Dasha's son and daughter; also Sergei's silent wife

Johnnie's family

Millicent and Ogden Post, his sister and brother-in-law

Miggie and Og, their children
Jerry Wilson, Johnnie's best friend

Boukashov's family

Kolia, his nephew, a former Red Army officer
Ketevána, Kolia's Armenian wife

Yuri's family

Professor and Mrs. Bourkévitch, his parents. The Professor heads a Russian-American anti-Communist organization
Karp, the Professor's follower

Other minor characters

Terenteeva, a former actress, who runs a drama school and gives a birthday party
Boris Kirilénko, a tenor—her beau
Mr. Owtch, a housepainter, who sometimes donates his labor and his paint to the church
Colonel Koudrov, the Professor's arch enemy, who heads a rival anti-Communist organization
Miss Klüpfel, who stands behind the candle desk

and

Last but by no means least, Archbishop Sofróny, head of the diocese and Father Vikenty's disapproving superior

Also three dogs: Punty, Bubúlenka, and Suleiman-the-Magnificent-Schnitzel

Part One

1

FATHER VIKENTY stopped at the corner of One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street and Fifth Avenue to let his dog enjoy a few sniffs. Instantly the brown boxer was lost to the outer world, nuzzling the base of a lamppost in search of social contacts. He was choosy and took his time. But finally he looked up at the priest, wagging his behind and puckering his forehead into deep furrows, making it quite clear he wanted his master to share in the joy of the find and set his mark of approval on it. The priest was a big man with a big smile that spread through his white beard as he looked down at the dog and shook his head. "Ech, Dragoon, my dear, such a comedian! I swear to God!" He spoke Russian, and his rumbling bass raised his voice far above the intended whisper. "If you've found something agreeable, by all means reciprocate. Give a little pleasure in return. Do unto others, you know, what you would they should do unto you." The words came straight from his heart, and it never occurred to him that under the circumstances some people might have found them profane.

While Dragoon attended to his social obligations, proffering first his left and then his right flank to the lamppost, Father Vikenty glanced at the time. It was half past five of a gloomy afternoon in late January, when street lights seemed to be lit for the sole purpose of shining on dreary puddles and dirty mounds of snow piled against the sidewalks. And he did not notice the short squat figure of a man in a nearby doorway, whose eyes were upon him with a monkeylike intensity; nor did he see the man's cauliflower ear bursting forth from the upturned collar of an overcoat to catch every word he said to his dog. Unaware of being spied upon, Father Vikenty watched the stream of people

hurrying by on their way home from work, heads bent against the cold drizzle. Some of them, glancing up, would recognize him and smile a friendly greeting, for his portly six-foot-three, topped by an enormous black felt hat, had been a familiar figure in that neighborhood for well over a quarter of a century. And, "Allo," he would boom at them. "Bad weather. No like. But tomorrow fine, maybe!"

Father Vikenty had lived in New York for thirty-six years but had never been able to master the English language, thereby giving the lie to the prevailing opinion that all Russians are good linguists. His grammar was poor, his accent thick, but that did not matter. Somehow it added to his charm. And those he had addressed went on their way, their faces less set after the impact of his bad English and his good smile; not that any of them were his parishioners or knew him personally, for few Russians lived in that vicinity.

His church was only a few blocks away, but the boundaries of his parish would be hard to define. The reason for it lay in a slow but steady rise in the economic status of its members. Shortly after the first world war a number of so-called "white" Russians, newly arrived in New York, had settled down in the Hundred-and-twenties and purchased a vacant Episcopal church building which they had gradually redecorated and adorned until its interior had been transformed into a semblance of a real Russian church. Since then most of them had moved to more prosperous districts and their numbers had been increased by a constant influx of new arrivals; yet old and new alike shunned the One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street neighborhood, except to attend divine services at the Church of the Transfiguration, as its founders had named it rather appropriately in more ways than one.

But perhaps Fourteenth Street might serve as a line of demarcation, beyond which the activities of Father Vikenty did not go. There were thousands of Russians living in the downtown district — immigrants and sons of immigrants, mostly of the peasant class — who had come to New York prior to 1914, fleeing from Tsarist Russia and its conscription. They had their own clubs, their own churches, and their own Russian priests to at-

tend to their spiritual needs. Father Vikenty's parishioners on the other hand had all come to the United States after 1917, fleeing from the Bolsheviks. And they were a diverse group of people, stemming from all walks of life, some of whom showed no tendency to conglomerate in one area and form a closely knit colony. They lived dispersed through mid- and upper Manhattan, and out in Queens and beyond. In order to visit some of them the priest had to travel to outlying suburban districts on Long Island and in Westchester, sometimes venturing even farther afield to the more rural regions of New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. Thus in the south, along Fourteenth Street or thereabouts, a vague boundary could be traced to Father Vikenty's parish; but east, west, and north there seemed to be no limits to it.

Dragoon looked up, expressing his satisfaction in a low growl way down in his throat, his hind legs stiff with enjoyment as he kicked them out one after the other, and the short muffled bark he indulged in came out as a puff through his soft round cheek. By that he meant he was ready to go on. "Well, all right, let's go," said Father Vikenty good-naturedly, and strolled across the sidewalk. But at the corner he stopped, his eyes suddenly glued to the wall.

Dragoon at his side glanced up in surprise. The priest's cheeks were flushed as he leaned forward a little to get a closer view of a poster. Eagerness and nostalgia were clearly written now all over his big round face. That the announcement of a wrestling match should bring forth so much emotion in so substantial a man of sixty, and a priest to boot, might have seemed peculiar or strange to anyone, yet it was as much a part of Father Vikenty's nature as was his love for his dog, and the bigness of his smile, and the innocence of his eyes. "Ech, Dragoon, Dragoon," he exclaimed, scanning the names of the contestants. "If I were thirty years younger, I'd take them all on, one by one, and lay them out flat, and pin them down so they couldn't stir a muscle!" He leaned still farther forward to examine the two gladiatorial figures shown on the poster, entwined in agonies of contortion. "A full nelson, eh? You should've seen the full nelsons I used to

clamp on them in my day; the devil himself couldn't have wriggled out of them!" Dragoon had cocked his head to one side and his brown eyes seemed to be laughing. The priest, noticing it, chuckled into his beard. "You don't believe it? Well, Dragoon, my dear, let me tell you, there was a time when I was simply terrific — every muscle playing in my body, and my bicepses — Och! Two boa constrictors! Yes, Dragoonushka. I swear to God!"

But Dragoon was no longer listening. He turned his head away sharply, looking at someone almost furtively; then glanced up at his master again with obvious anxiety. At the same moment a low voice, speaking Russian, resounded close to Father Vikenty's shoulder. "Is it seemly for a priest to talk about his muscles, especially to a dog?" The utter contempt with which the word "dog" had been pronounced brought a guilty look into Dragoon's eyes. In obvious embarrassment he wagged his short tail, and with it his hindquarters, as though to excuse himself.

Father Vikenty turned around with a start. Beside him stood an odd figure of a man, short and squat, his head barely reaching up to the priest's shoulder. His thick neck, his oversized torso and short legs, even his features — the lumpy nose, the coarse lips and stubborn chin — seemed to hang on the brink of deformity, making one think of an overgrown and rather pompous dwarf. But there was a kind of ferocious dignity about him, too, that forbade any form of levity; and the cauliflower ear, that peered from the upturned collar of his overcoat, seemed to proclaim a pugnacious spirit.

"*Psholl* — " he hissed at Dragoon, waving him away with a pudgy hand as though he were entirely to blame. Dragoon moved back a step or two and slowly opened and closed his jaws in an imaginary bite that could have been taken for a ghost of a threat or a lazy but nevertheless scornful dismissal — Aw, get along with you!

"Ivan Ivanovitch," cried Father Vikenty with the shamefaced mien of a small boy caught in the act of trespassing. "Now is it nice, I ask you, to creep up on a fellow like that? You almost gave me a fright!"

Thus admonished, Ivan Ivanovitch, the church warden, did

not bat an eyelash. "Those who have guilty consciences," he intoned in a lugubrious voice, "get easily scared."

"I was merely glancing at the poster."

"It's the thought behind the glance that counts."

Father Vikenty's face got redder by the minute, and his excuses increased the impression of guilt. He had drawn himself up to his full height, while his diminutive interlocutor kept puffing up his chest with pompous righteousness until he began to bear an alarming resemblance to a small balloon ready to be pricked.

"I had no intention of going to the wrestling match, Ivan Ivanovitch. I assure you, no intention whatsoever."

"I should think not! What would His Eminence say!"

His Eminence? Father Vikenty winced. The thought of the Archbishop never failed to fill him with awe, for to him that ascetic disciplinarian stood as a living symbol of the intransigence of the Church in matters canonical, of its unshakable belief in the inviolability of its doctrines. And Father Vikenty in all humility, even with fear and trembling, submitted himself to the bishop's will as to the one force of good that could curb and subdue the desires and passions nature had so abundantly bestowed upon him.

This time at least, he consoled himself, I have done no wrong. But Ivan Ivanovitch seemed to think differently. He said: "I know you didn't intend to go since my Lord Sofrony" — he was referring to the Archbishop again — "disapproves of your attending wrestling matches. But whosoever thinketh of a woman with desire — Remember? Well, that goes for wrestling bouts, too. But let's not speak of that. To my regret — I might even say to my profound regret — I find it necessary to confront you with a far more serious, a far more disturbing matter."

Father Vikenty stared at him, surprise mingling with misgivings, while Dragoon sat down on his haunches, drawing in his nostrils the better to inhale the essence of this bombastic little man; and the expression on his face left no doubts that the whiffs he got were not to his liking.

"I'm only a plain soldier by profession, the son of a simple, un-

educated peasant," Ivan Ivanovitch went on in an unsuccessful effort at self-deprecation, "but I recognize profanity when I hear it. And I heard you, Father Vikenty! Yes, I heard you when you stood over there near that lamppost. You said, 'Do unto others what you would they should do unto you.' The sacred words of our Lord and Saviour, and addressed to whom? To a dog! And to what unclean purpose, too — urging the animal to answer the calls of nature!"

Ordinarily Father Vikenty would have explained as good-naturedly as he could that it had been a case of canine public relations, not a call of nature, but he was far too shaken for that. Presented in this light, his words appeared to him now as unmitigated blasphemy. He forgot about the Archbishop and his wrath, he forgot about Ivan Ivanovitch and his tale-telling proclivities, he just stood there, stunned by the enormity of his own thoughtlessness. And Ivan Ivanovitch looked at him with satisfaction, knowing exactly how he felt, for Father Vikenty's honest face was an open book to anyone who wished to read it. Finally Ivan Ivanovitch said, "I had to confront you with it. I am your conscience."

This strange assertion, though delivered boldly, was punctuated, nevertheless, by a slight question mark. But Ivan Ivanovitch might have spared himself the worries of uncertainty, for Father Vikenty had no intention of denying his statement. He knew it to be true. What is more, he himself had willed it so. In a moment of penitence, after one of those bouts which always seemed to creep up on him unawares and then carry him to excesses, he had prostrated himself at the feet of the Archbishop, crying out, "Let Ivan Ivanovitch Puziriov be my guiding conscience!" He had given Ivan Ivanovitch a key to his apartment to enable him to come and go at his will, checking on his activities. And he had done this in an ardent desire to humble himself, for in his heart he felt a strong antipathy for the little man, an antipathy which he had long struggled with in an effort to overcome it. He nodded his assent now. "Ech, Ivan Ivanovitch, my tongue is my enemy. And that's the truth!"

Ivan Ivanovitch clasped his hands together, and the sudden

appeal in his voice had a true ring to it, "Ar, Father Vikenty, how often, how very often you forget the dignity of your station!"

The dignity of the Russian Orthodox Church was a matter of the utmost importance to Ivan Ivanovitch, particularly the dignity of the Church of the Transfiguration to which he had subjected his entire life. Father Vikenty knew this. He also knew that this complete subjection was the clue to a warped and twisted nature. For Ivan Ivanovitch was a man who longed to cringe in ecstasies of insignificance. His pride however gave him an inflated sense of his own importance. Had it been possible to find a human being to whom he could have cried out in all sincerity, "You are godlike and I am a worm. Tread on me!" he would undoubtedly have found complete happiness and satisfaction. But no ordinary man or woman could fulfill such a role, and the church, albeit holy in his eyes, remained impersonal, whereas his own being craved the personal touch in order to obtain full satisfaction out of worship, and yearnings filled the secret caverns of his soul. He longed to see not so much in Father Vikenty the man as in Father Vikenty the priest an embodiment of godlike majesty (and of godlike wrath, too, when the circumstances demanded it), at whose feet he could grovel and lose himself in adoration.

Father Vikenty was the true mainspring of his church, the living link between its diverse and often ill-assorted members. This, as well as his natural goodness and friendliness, Ivan Ivanovitch recognized, for he was not totally blind to such things. But he also saw weaknesses in Father Vikenty, which drove him to extremes of exasperation; and not the least among these weaknesses was the priest's love for his dog.

Ivan Ivanovitch had little use for dogs. They were, he thought, unmannerly beasts, created for some purpose no doubt, but certainly not to be the companions of priests. "Is it seemly, I ask you," he could be heard to exclaim at times, "for a person in the Holy Orders to fuss over an animal that pokes its nose into such awful places?" And the fact that Father Vikenty continued to shower his affection on Dragoon filled him with an indignation that amounted almost to disgust. He frowned now, as his eye

alighted once again on Dragoon. "Such an ugly black mug," he cried, trying by the vehemence of his tone to make up for his momentary weakness in making an appeal. "I hope this will open your eyes, Father Vikenty. The sooner you get rid of him the better. It's your love for this lowly animal that has brought you to such a pass!"

Dragoon hung his head. But if it had been Ivan Ivanovitch's intention to strengthen Father Vikenty's remorse, he had certainly said the wrong thing. He only succeeded in making him forget it. No one, Father Vikenty thought, had the right to suggest his giving up or doing away with Dragoon. "There, Dragoonushka," he said coaxingly, "don't you listen to him. He doesn't know what he is saying." He stroked the dog's head, and instantly Dragoon began to jump and frisk around him in jubilation. But Father Vikenty's eye was on Ivan Ivanovitch. It was unusually severe, too. "You should be ashamed of yourself, blaming my lapses on a poor innocent animal." He turned away abruptly. "Come! We better hurry to the church. I hope they've finished painting it. Tomorrow is Saturday. I wouldn't like it to smell too strongly of paint during vespers."

"Oh yes," said Ivan Ivanovitch. "I'm sure they are through. Mr. — " he pronounced the word with a long Russian inflection — "Meester Owtch said it would be ready today. And so it will be. Meester Owtch wouldn't let us down."

Father Vikenty started off at a quick pace, Ivan Ivanovitch hurrying by his side. Dragoon trotted behind the priest, the leash that connected him to his master's wrist swinging loose between them. "I suppose the ladies will be there, too," Father Vikenty mused, his broad smile proclaiming his regained composure. "They've probably tons of troubles to unload on us. All their difficulties in connection with the organization of the Concert-Ball."

"That Concert-Ball must be a success," Ivan Ivanovitch said, with a strong emphasis on the "must." "Our church needs the money. I don't know how we'll meet the second mortgage without it."

His short legs were moving fast, taking three steps to one of Father Vikenty's long strides; and Father Vikenty, perhaps to

punish him for his boorishness, showed no inclination to reduce his pace. In his effort to keep up with him, Ivan Ivanovitch bent his long body forward at an awkward angle, so that it seemed to precede his feet; but he had thrown his head back, and this gave him the impression that he was moving with manly dignity and grandeur.

At the end of the block they turned west. But when they reached the church Ivan Ivanovitch stopped. "Where are you going to leave Dragoon, Father Vikenty?"

"Why, at the Club."

"If you ask me, even the Club is too close to sacred grounds for a dog!"

For once real sarcasm filtered through Father Vikenty's voice. "They let in quite a few asses, so why not a dog?"

Ivan Ivanovitch, taken aback, found nothing to say to this. They turned a corner in silence. Then another; entering a short narrow alley, at the end of which a light shone over a door. It was the door to the Community Hall adjoining the church and known as the Club. Ivan Ivanovitch, always a stickler to protocol, hurried ahead and held the door open for the priest, at the same time scowling at Dragoon. But Dragoon pretended not to see him.

In the square hall, which they now entered, Father Vikenty hung his big black hat on a doorknob and turned to Dragoon. "Watch my hat, Dragoonushka, like the good dragoon that you are."

"And what if he takes it into his head to disobey you this time and come into the church?"

Father Vikenty looked at the little man with reproach. "Why, Ivan Ivanovitch, you should know him better."

He then turned into a short corridor on his right, where a back door led into the church proper. Ivan Ivanovitch followed him. And it was a good thing that the little man didn't glance over his shoulder, for no sooner had he turned his back than Dragoon lifted his leg and sprayed the edge of his coat.

2

THE FIRST IMPRESSION on entering the church was of a hundred shimmering lights — little tongues of flame glimmering inside the colored glass receptacles of image lamps hung in front of icons; and there were icons everywhere along the walls and on the iconostasis — the gilded screen that hid the altar from view. The church was empty of pews — as all Russian churches are — but chairs had been placed near the walls for the aged and the weak. From behind the tall iconostasis rose a large mural of Christ enthroned, and down below, facing it, near a double door leading to an outer vestibule, stood a large roll-top desk for the sale of candles to worshipers. Ordinarily a faint odor of incense clung to every corner of the building, but on this particular afternoon a smell of fresh paint permeated the air.

The door through which Father Vikenty entered was situated at the far end of the church to the right of the iconostasis. Ivan Ivanovitch, following in his footsteps, made sure the door was properly closed behind him. He then knelt with his face to the invisible altar, and prostrated himself three times, his forehead touching the floor.

Father Vikenty, meanwhile, glanced around. Three other people were there — a man and two women. The man, rotund and almost entirely bald, was gazing up at those sections of the walls which, unadorned by icons or murals, had been covered with a fresh coating of ivory-colored paint. The two women were walking slowly to and fro, talking in low whispers. One of them was very stout, the other very thin. They brought to Father Vikenty's mind the seven fat and seven lean cows of Pharoah's dream. One of each must have strayed in here, he said to himself with a chuckle. But let there be no swallowing!

He knew all these people by heart. The two women, together with Ivan Ivanovitch, formed what he called the "Triumvirate" of his church. The man, though an outsider as far as the administration of the church was concerned, had been known to him for over twenty years. Father Vikenty was familiar with all their peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, and in this the secrets of the confessional had undoubtedly added to his natural discernment; for although he did his best to forget what was confessed in his presence, he couldn't help but store some of it in his subconscious.

He took them all in at a glance. The man was "Meester" Owtch, of whom Ivan Ivanovitch had spoken with so much confidence. Upon his arrival in New York some twenty-odd years ago, burning with a desire to assimilate himself as quickly as possible with these privileged Americans who could put him in the way of financial success and thereby give him self-confidence, he had changed his name from Kondraty Ovtchinnikov to Conrad Owtch; and the substitution of a *w* for the *v* in his last name had seemed to him the quintessence of Americanization. He had taken up house painting, later becoming a contractor on a modest scale, and had done moderately well for himself, whose earlier background had been his father's small grocery store somewhere on the Don.

Father Vikenty's secret chuckle spread into a broad smile as his eyes came to rest once more on the imposing figure of the stout lady. Of all his church workers she was his favorite; and he knew that of the Triumvirate she was the one who loved him in the most disinterested way. And it wasn't surprising that his smile kept spreading through his beard as he looked at her. There was so much candor in her round face, so much determination in her small turned-up nose, and such an overpowering sweep to her gestures that "audacious" seemed to rise up in one's mind as the most appropriate adjective with which to describe her. And her name was as well rounded as her person — Smaragda Vasilievna Pishnik-Zabubenchikov — though her friends usually called her Madame Pishnik. The widow of a general who had died shortly after their arrival in New York, she had flung herself undaunted

into the unpaid services of the then newly founded church. She sang in the choir, organized entertainments for the raising of funds, headed the Sisterhood of St. Martha — a group of ladies who cleaned the church, did the laundry, replenished the oil in the image lamps, and performed a number of other useful chores — while giving a bare minimum of her time to her abilities as a seamstress, by which she managed to keep herself alive in a small two-room apartment off Amsterdam Avenue.

Father Vikenty's eyes became more pensive as they shifted from her to her companion. This elderly person represented a contrast to Madame Pishnik in every respect. Small, shy, and retiring, she had never married. Her eyes were bulbous, her lips thin, and her nose long and fleshy; and her character was a mixture of pride and shrinking, of dedication and snobbery. Her pride was restricted to caste, her shrinking was general; her dedication was to the church, while her snobbery reflected itself in petty things which to her seemed of importance. Thus Miss Katastrofoff — for that was her name — Lydia Petrovna Katastrofoff — was most particular, almost to the point of absurdity, to have her last name spelt with two *f's* at the end instead of the more plebeian *v*; and vague unfinished sentences, which she introduced from time to time into her conversation, such as, "We in St. Petersburg — " or "My uncle, the Senator — " or "My cousin Marie Katastrofoff, in her capacity of maid-of-honor to the Empresses — " served to imply that she alone of the company she was forced to keep had a true and intimate knowledge of the manners and customs of those higher spheres of society in prerevolutionary Russia, on the outer fringes of which she had hovered in her youth.

This noble spinster was employed in a warehouse. There, during the day, she was engaged in keeping inventories. But her evenings were given up, without remuneration, to her duties as Secretary-Treasurer of the Church of the Transfiguration. She, too, was devoted to Father Vikenty, though her devotion was of a more romantic nature than Madame Pishnik's. Had he been free to marry, she might have forgotten her pride of caste and set her cap at him; but since this was out of the question, she had trained herself to think of her feelings as existing on a higher plane. And

Madame Pishnik, knowing this, would tease Miss Katastrofoff, in her blunt way: "Oh, don't pretend to me! It's not his priesthood, it's that mighty frame of his that you revere!"

The truth, as much as the indelicacy of such remarks, would bring blushes to Miss Katastrofoff's thin and otherwise sallow cheeks; while Ivan Ivanovitch, if he happened to be present, would scowl. For to complete the cycle of events which interlocked the lives of these people, it should be explained that the little man had surprised everyone the year before by asking Miss Katastrofoff to marry him. She had rebuffed him with a curt, "Have you lost your senses?" Whereupon in his slighted pride he had let loose a stream of venom and rudeness: "You may be an unpolluted flower, but of what good is that? Thoughts are as sinful as deeds, and your libidinous thoughts are all aimed at the cloth!" Which had left the poor old maid in a state of extreme agitation and wrath.

Father Vikenty knew that Mr. Owtch and the two ladies were anxious to speak to him. He took a few steps forward and stopped, giving them an opportunity to come to him one by one. Mr. Owtch lost no time in hurrying to his side, but the ladies hung back, determined to lay their problems before him in private. And Ivan Ivanovitch, having completed his devotions, rose from his knees and approached Father Vikenty from the rear, his cauliflower ear on the alert.

"You see, Batiushka," Mr. Owtch exclaimed ("Batiushka" being another way of addressing a priest in Russian, a little less formal than "Father So-and-so"), "you were afraid they wouldn't be ready on time. But Conrad Owtch is a man of his word. What he says, he does." He slipped his hand into the priest's arm and pointed to the walls. "Aren't they beautiful? Isn't it a first-class job? Maybe you think because it's a plain coating it requires no skill? But you are wrong. Years of experience have gone into it, a practiced wrist, an even stroke, vigilance! In other words, the sweat of my brow is in those walls as a gift to the church!" His blurred features took on a sudden sharpness, as a foxy smile spread across his lips. "That will bring me forgiveness for many sins, won't it, Batiushka?"

Father Vikenty experienced a vague feeling of uneasiness, as he always did when Mr. Owtch carried on in this way. In his overwhelming ambition to be a financial success — "poifect American success," as he put it — Mr. Owtch had never learned to properly differentiate between sharp practice and a shrewd deal. To him "business" and "racket" were synonymous, but, lacking the courage and imagination to become a big shot in either of them, he allowed himself a pang of conscience now and then over the knaveries in which he sometimes indulged. To this end, once every two years he would have the interior of the church repainted at his own expense, and a few weeks later, during Lent, would go to confession and Communion. What distressed Father Vikenty most about these practices was the element of bribery in them, against which he felt helpless.

"Well, Kondraty," he said, using Mr. Owtch's Russian name instead of its Americanized version, "have you forgiven those who have cheated you?"

"Oh, no! I have them dragged into court. This is a land of law and justice!"

At this point Ivan Ivanovitch felt it incumbent upon him to intervene on his friend's behalf. After all, he occasionally, through Mr. Owtch's influence, obtained a good bargain for the church. "Come now, Father Vikenty, why should he forgive some thieving rascal? And the way you put it — It isn't nice. Meester Owtch might think you suspected him of cheating us!"

Father Vikenty blushed a little. He was maladroit at expressing his innermost thoughts. Mr. Owtch was undoubtedly capable of using inferior or diluted paint in his "gift" to the church, but that hadn't crossed his mind. He toyed with the idea of quoting for their benefit, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," but he gave it up. He did not like to preach. His priesthood had been thrust upon him; he had considered himself unworthy of it at the time. And although throughout the years he had grown accustomed to it and took it seriously, there was a kind of modesty in him which made him feel that anything he had thought through must have been thought through by others before him, and it was therefore useless, somehow, and

presumptuous on his part to bring it again to their attention. "Oh well," he said vaguely, following his own trend of thought rather than Ivan Ivanovitch's rebuke, "who of us hasn't been tripped — ?"

Ivan Ivanovitch looked mystified, but Mr. Owtch, taking this for another veiled dart in his direction, became all the more anxious to obtain from Father Vikenty in advance a promise of absolution. For the confessional offered a unique outlet for his particular form of braggadocio, a chance of impressing the Lord as well as simple mortals. This he couldn't resist, though he was determined at the same time to escape any tiresome and boring penances that Father Vikenty might some day take it into his head to impose upon him. "Batiushka," he exclaimed with a brightness that was almost too conspicuous, "you know how fond my wife is of you. Won't you come and dine with us some evening next week before she goes to Florida? Then you and I could have a good, long, heart-to-heart talk."

There was about this rotund and bald man a kind of bonhomie that seemed to generate in others a leniency toward him — a kind of amused "You rascal," instead of an indignant "You crook!" And Father Vikenty couldn't help smiling at him now. "Kondraty, my dear, ask me some other time. After Easter, perhaps, when I'll be less busy. Then I will come with pleasure — With pleasure."

The old devil won't commit himself, Mr. Owtch thought. But he returned the smile. Then he took leave of Ivan Ivanovitch, making him promise he would come next week, and departed, leaving Father Vikenty alone with his Triumvirate.

The ladies rushed forward, engulfing Father Vikenty in a wave of excitement. He could plainly see that they had been having a heated argument. Even at ordinary times Miss Katastrofoff's thin face looked cheerless under the strain of long hours of work, sketchy meals, and dreary trips at all hours of the day and night to and from her home in Jackson Heights; sometimes at midnight, after a late and stormy session of the Church Committee, he would feel full of compassion for her, thinking of how she must be standing alone in some subway station waiting for a

connection, her long nose drooping with fatigue; but now her face looked positively woebegone, though she did her best to hide her anxiety behind her natural reticence. But Madame Pishnik went straight to the point with such a flurry of gesticulation that her purple velvet toque slid to the back of her head. She shoved it into place with the palm of her hand, exclaiming at the same time, "And I say the Concert-Ball will be a fiasco if Father Vikenty doesn't do something about it!"

A rumble of alarm reverberated in the depths of Ivan Ivanovitch's throat, while Father Vikenty tried to calm her. "What are you saying? Surely not a fiasco?"

"Yes, a fiasco, a fiasco! You are the only one who might prevent it."

"But—" Miss Katastrofoff put in in her hesitant way, "I tell you it isn't right—My uncle always said—After all a Senator should know something about such matters—"

"I don't care what Senator Katastrofoff said. We are threatened with a real catastrophe!"

The pun drew Miss Katastrofoff's thin lips tighter together, and a sigh of long suffering censured its bad taste. After that she cloaked herself in dignified silence, while Madame Pishnik went on unembarrassed, addressing herself solely to Father Vikenty, "I will tell you and you will understand. Princess Tverskoy said she would take two tickets but the Prince wasn't feeling well and she didn't think they would come. Professor Bourkevitch's wife said she *might* take two tickets but she didn't think they would come. And Terenteeva is stalling!"

This last announcement, with its full measure of drama, had a strong effect on Father Vikenty and Ivan Ivanovitch, while Miss Katastrofoff delivered herself of another prolonged sigh which seemed to denote utter helplessness. Never before had Terenteeva refused to appear in any performance organized for the benefit of the church; and to all four of them, with their somewhat provincial approach to artistic talent and the limited number of artists at their disposal, it seemed that no concert program could be a success without Terenteeva's participation. The image of the dark, flashy-eyed, full-bosomed woman, with a

deep voice and a provoking smile that never failed to bring forth loud applause, flashed through Father Vikenty's mind. The daughter of a well-known Moscow actress, she now ran a small school of drama in New York. Her real name was Madame Olga Terentieva (accent on the second syllable), but her American pupils pronounced it Terenteeva, and this had stuck as a nickname among her Russian friends.

Madame Pishnik knew how to time her effects. She allowed her words to sink in before making her final demand: "Father Vikenty, you must go and see these people yourself and reason with them."

Ivan Ivanovitch bristled. "That is your business. You must fight it out with them. It would be lowering the dignity of the church if our priest went around begging!"

Miss Katastrofoff, who in the past year, ever since Ivan Ivanovitch's unfortunate proposal of marriage, had never addressed him directly, or referred to him by name, except to say disdainfully to others, "THAT Puziriov," turned to Father Vikenty and Madame Pishnik. "The church warden has expressed my views. That's precisely what I was going to say when — "

"Don't you think I've thought of that, too?" Madame Pishnik returned to the attack, her ordinarily pleasant voice growing a little hoarse under the strain. "Would I ever do anything to hurt Father Vikenty's dignity? Then what are you talking about? He knows these people. He's been to see them before. And he won't be begging, he'll be shaming them! Their excuses are just so much nonsense, and you know it. Take Prince Tverskoy, for instance. He's not ill, he's just a capricious old goat! He dislikes Professor Bourkevitch, he disapproves of Terenteeva, and he's bored. So he refuses to come, and refuses to let the Princess come without him. A fine thing! The Honorary Chairman of the Committee absent from the Concert-Ball! Not to mention all her relatives and friends. Why, she alone could sell fifty tickets if she set her mind to it. Now you just think of that — a loss to our prestige, and a loss to our revenues!" She brandished her right hand and clamped it down on the forefinger of her left to indicate that this case had been disposed of to everyone's satisfaction.

"Now take Professor Bourkevitch." There was another flourish of her hand and another finger went down to show that she would dispose of this matter in the same convincing way. "It's the same thing, only in reverse. He hates Prince Tverskoy and all his ilk. He says our church has become a nest of dyed-in-the-wool reactionaries. So he, too, refuses to come, and refuses to let his wife come. What will it be like, I ask you, with both the Honorary Chairman and the Honorary Vice-chairman absent? You remember the struggle we had in getting Madame Bourkevitch to accept the position? Well, now she is trying to wriggle out of it. At least he is. And think of the loss to us! The Bourkevitches are very influential among a certain set. They could be good for another fifty tickets. And he, not she, is the snake in the grass, believe me. Don't any of you be fooled by him. He's stubborn and willful and self-opinionated, the sleepy-looking salamander!"

Father Vikenty smiled. Somehow, "Capricious old goat" and "Sleepy-looking salamander" seemed such suitable epithets for Prince Tverskoy and Professor Bourkevitch respectively, the one lean and stringy, with a long face and a small pointed beard, the other flattened out as it were, with a big square mouth and half-closed eyes. But he said nothing, for Madame Pishnik wasn't through yet. "As for Terenteeva," she exclaimed, "she is just being temperamental. It seems Princess Tverskoy said something about her and Boris. So now she is playing the offended prima donna. But if she refuses to appear on our program, then I give up!" She let her arms drop in a dramatic gesture of abdication. But a moment later her right hand was up again, pointing at Father Vikenty. "You, Batiushka, are the only one who can reason with her and the others. They all love you."

Miss Katastrofoff and Ivan Ivanovitch were silenced and convinced, too, no doubt, by this long and impassioned tirade. They looked at Father Vikenty, waiting for his reply, while he shook his head and gave a deep sigh. "Such characters," he said half to himself. Not that he hesitated to accept Madame Pishnik's challenge: for years he had longed and prayed that the spirit of concord and harmony and brotherly love might descend upon

the members of his church in a kind of pentecostal blessing and now he felt saddened by all he had heard. Yes, it had always been his secret dream to see all his parishioners joined into a happy group around his church, oblivious of their political and personal differences; but Madame Pishnik's report seemed to indicate that there was no common ground on which they could meet, except to attend divine service and then go their way.

Such a beautiful, lovely church, too, he thought, casting a loving glance around. His feeling about his church may have been sentimental at times, but it was the sentimentality of a simple and ardent heart. Every time he entered the church he felt as if he had opened a jewel box filled with sparkling gems, or had suddenly come across a beautiful prayer crystalized into shape and form. "But why should I worry?" he said to himself again. "They can't resist forever, its beauty will gradually draw them closer together. Some day something will happen here and the miracle will take place — they will see eye to eye."

His own wandering eyes came to rest on Madame Pishnik's honest flushed face. A look of anxious interrogation was stamped all over it, but an unexpected interruption prevented Father Vikenty from giving her his answer: the double door leading to the outer vestibule was flung open, and a young man appeared on the threshold. He seemed to hesitate. Then he took a step forward and almost slammed the door behind him with annoyance. Why does he come in if he doesn't want to? The question flashed through Father Vikenty's mind as he, and with him the others, looked closely at the newcomer. The young man was still wearing his hat; but after glancing around with a mixture of derision and bravado, he tore it off in an irritated sort of way.

3

A FEW QUICK DIGS into his memory served to convince Father Vikenty that he had never seen the young man's face before. Looks twenty-five, but might be closer to thirty, he said to himself. It was an intelligent young face, though lacking in refinement; and its earnestness seemed to preclude those lighter shades without which life can often become a problem. There was no mistaking it for anything but Russian; probably Soviet-bred, he thought, as the young man came toward him with a brisk step. The eyes that held his were clear and straight. He liked them. There was an innocence about them, not of the stainless, of the sheltered kind; like those of a young monk, who, having escaped the rigid rules of his order and the tyrannies of an abbot, finds himself face to face with the vagaries of an unregimented world. But a certain arrogance in the young stranger's bearing, put on, Father Vikenty thought, out of self-defense, made him feel a little sorry for him. He met him with a smile of encouragement, but the young man's face remained unyielding. "Are you the priest?" he asked, the abruptness of his tone verging on insolence.

A murmur of disapproval escaped the ladies. Ivan Ivanovitch drew himself up to his full five feet one, and his lower lip came shooting out, adding to the natural heaviness of his jowls. "Is that a proper tone to take when addressing a man in holy orders?" he growled.

The young man's shrug was spontaneous enough. "I don't know. I've never addressed one before."

This confirmed Father Vikenty in his original surmise. "Are you a refugee from the Soviets?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And how long have you been in this country?"

"Two years."

There was a resentment at being questioned in these curt replies which Father Vikenty did not fail to detect. "Well," he said at length, "what can I do for you?"

"For me? Nothing!"

The tone was defiant now. Father Vikenty noticed the effect it had on the members of his Triumvirate. Miss Katastrofoff's thin face was full of scorn. Distrustful of anyone coming from the Soviet Union, she moved away a step or two to indicate that she washed her hands of this encounter. He may not be a Bolshevik, she seemed to say, but his manners are atrocious. Desist from touching him even with tongs. Madame Pishnik's reactions to the oddities of human behavior were of a more charitable nature, and she remained where she was, eying the young man with good-natured curiosity, while Ivan Ivanovitch continued to glare at him. For this virulent little man, whose contumely was positively shocking at times, deemed it his sole privilege and prerogative to be rude to Father Vikenty. And Father Vikenty, knowing all this, gave his three companions a look which was intended to allay, encourage, and pacify them in turn.

"Is it someone in your family who needs me?" he asked.

"Yes. My wife. She wants to have our baby baptized." The young man grew red in the face. It clearly was an effort for him to make the request. "Will you come to my apartment and baptize the child?"

"Why yes—"

Father Vikenty's hesitation was born of surprise, not of any reluctance to comply. But the young man thought he was stalling, or perhaps even refusing, and he spoke a little breathlessly, stumbling over his sentences. "I work in a match factory. I earn a good salary. I can pay whatever is needed. I have no choice. Ketevana still clings to these old superstitions."

"Ketevana—?" Father Vikenty repeated, trying by his interest to put the young man at his ease. "That is a Georgian name."

"My Ketevana is an Armenian. But she said to tell you her mother was half Russian and she was brought up in your faith,

not in the Gregorian. Of course I wouldn't know the difference between these barbaric superstitions." And growing red in the face, he added, "Will you come and christen the child? Tomorrow at noon. I'm free on Saturdays, and the sooner we get it over with the better. But you must understand, I look upon it as a psychotherapeutic treatment!"

Father Vikenty broke into a soft, kindhearted laugh at which no one could take offense. "Don't let that worry you, dear soul. You can think of psychotherapy, and I will pray to God."

It was one of those spontaneous remarks of his, rendered more irresistible by a touch of self-deprecating irony in his voice, and the young man's face became suffused with a deep flush. "Ketevana has been so unhappy," he cried, suddenly unbosoming himself. And taking Father Vikenty aside, he spilled the rest of his story in a quick, breathless voice. His refusal had so upset his wife, he said, that she had lost her milk, and didn't sleep well at night; she hardly ate anything and was losing weight. She insisted that to have married him without the blessing of the church was her own personal sin, but in the case of her little girl she carried the responsibility for another soul. He, of course, could not understand such niceties of superstition, but since his refusal had made her so unhappy, and since he didn't really care one way or another about these foolish rites and rituals, he had decided to give in.

Father Vikenty nodded and smiled at everything he said. Finally the young man confessed he had another request to make. His wife, he said, had told him that godparents were indispensable at a christening. He didn't want to ask any of his friends, not caring to have them witness his weakness and surrender. Father Vikenty smiled to himself. He turned to Ivan Ivanovitch. "Well, here is a possible godfather. How about it, Ivan Ivanovitch? Are you free tomorrow at noon? I am." Ivan Ivanovitch bowed stiffly from the waist, to indicate that he would be free, and Father Vikenty turned back to the young man. "This is our church warden, Ivan Ivanovitch Puziriov. And — But I don't know your name."

"Strelkin."

"And your first name?"

"Kolia."

"Ah — ! Nicholas?"

"No! My father was a staunch Bolshevik. He had no use for saints' names. He called me Kolkhoz." For just an instant Father Vikenty stared at him, incredulous and puzzled. "Kolkhoz?" he said to himself. "A collective farm? How could any man be so crazy as to call his son a collective farm?" But Kolia was smiling now for the first time, a shy, embarrassed smile. "My mother always called me Kolia, and it stuck. I'm glad now that it did."

His smile released Miss Katastrofoff's sarcastic titter and Madame Pishnik's amused gurgle, which had been bubbling up within them at the thought of any man calling his son Kolkhoz. Ivan Ivanovitch sneered. And Father Vikenty indulged again in one of those soft, heartwarming laughs of his. "Indeed, Kolia, your mother showed wisdom and foresight. And now we have half of our business in the bag — "

Father Vikenty couldn't resist a sly smile in the church warden's direction, for it was somehow satisfying to think of the little man as something one could shove into a bag. "As for the godmother — " he then went on, and hesitated, intercepting the questioning look which Kolia had shot at the two ladies. Miss Katastrofoff quickly shook her head, while Madame Pishnik's impulsive gestures — her hands first pressed to her heart and then thrown out in silent impotence — testified to her inability to accept. "Our ladies are so busy, so overworked, my dear Kolia. Like beasts of burden. I swear to God! But don't you worry, I'll find a godmother for your child."

Kolia handed him a slip of paper. "Here is my address. But please don't give it to anyone. And one more thing. Don't bring anyone else with you — just the two godparents. You see, I've got my uncle living with me, who is more or less in hiding. You have probably heard of him — Panteley Boukashov!"

It was quite evident that Kolia expected his listeners to be impressed by the name. At first it drew a blank in Father Vikenty's mind, but a nudge from Ivan Ivanovitch brought to his

memory the headlines he had seen in the New York papers two years before, featuring the sensational escape of Boukashov, a member of a Soviet delegation. He remembered the excitement and the talk it had created at the time. But since then he had heard nothing of the man. "Is he in danger?" he asked with concern.

Kolia shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, there is always the danger of his being kidnaped by Soviet spies. The F.B.I. is still guarding him, you know. But that is not the point. Boukashov is very busy. He is writing a book. He doesn't want to meet a lot of strangers."

Father Vikenty's significant nod conveyed his appreciation of the situation; and Kolia, partly from a lack of manners, and partly because he felt embarrassed again at having stooped so low as to ask for the services of a priest, turned and walked away without saying goodbye.

But near the double door he stopped, arrested by Madame Pishnik's excited voice. "Ah, Natasha, our darling! Our beauty! Our glamour girl!" She pronounced it "Glamma-gerrrl." The young girl thus addressed had come in through the club door. Madame Pishnik had run to meet her, and was now hugging and kissing her, while the fair-haired, dark-eyed daughter of the Tverskoys accepted these effusions with an embarrassment tinged with pleasure.

The Tverskoys ranked among the oldest and most aristocratic families of old Russia. Their name had been famous throughout Russian history, and Madame Pishnik could not resist the temptation of impressing the young man from the Soviets, just as he had tried to impress them with the name of Boukashov. "Yes, Kolia Kolkhozovitch," she said, stressing by her tone of banter the mockery she was making of his name — for Madame Pishnik could be quite spiteful when aroused, and she had been angered by the rude way in which he had taken leave of Father Vikenty. "This is Princess Natalia Andrevna Tverskoy, who might perhaps consent to act as godmother to your daughter."

But Kolia showed no sign of having recognized the ancient name; all he expressed was a deep resentment at the ridiculing of his own. His eyes were like angry needles darting at Madame

Pishnik, at Natasha, at Father Vikenty; then demonstratively he clamped his hat on his head and went out, Ivan Ivanovitch scurrying after him with an angry snort in order to lock the street door behind him.

Miss Katastrofoff, forgetting all reticence, was trembling with indignation to the very tip of her long fleshy nose. "Such a shameless, brazen insult to the House of God!"

Father Vikenty tried to comfort her. "Ech, Lydia Petrovna, my dear, don't let it upset you so. He doesn't know any better. The poor lad carries a deep hurt, but he also has a gift of love."

But the two ladies were equally indignant that Kolia had put his hat on in church with the obvious intention to offend. They wouldn't listen to him. "A godless guttersnipe," exclaimed Madame Pishnik; "You are too trustful," cried Miss Katastrofoff; while Ivan Ivanovitch, who had returned just in time to catch Father Vikenty's last words, frowned threateningly at the priest.

Natasha had been looking at them all in surprise. She went up to Father Vikenty now and gave him an affectionate peck on the cheek. "What is all this about? And who is that strange young man?"

Father Vikenty's eyes, as he looked at her, grew warm with affection. There existed between this young girl and the aging priest a close bond, which dated back to Natasha's early childhood when he had given her her first religious instruction. In those days this only daughter and youngest child of the Tverskoys had often moved him to tears with her amusing and endearing ways, making him think of his own child, the little girl he had lost in Russia. Since then Natasha had grown into a tall young woman, with a mischievous smile and upward-tilted eyes. Lacking perhaps the individual chic of a Parisienne, she was, nevertheless, always smartly turned out, possessing a full measure of that neat and polished elegance typical of the well-dressed woman in America. She was full of vitality; popular, worldly, gay, with a tendency toward volatility and recklessness, born of youthful success. But her main charm, so irresistible to the old man, lay in an occasional, childlike gravity unobliterated by the sophistication and frivolities of later years.

He told her in a few words of his interview with Kolia, noting

a sharply rising interest in her eyes at the mention of Boukashov's name. "How exciting," she exclaimed. "I'm so curious to see what he's like. Of course I'll be godmother. Where does this Strelkin live?"

Father Vikenty glanced at the slip of paper in his hand, then put it in his pocket. "On Riverside Drive, up near One Hundred and Tenth Street."

"I might be able to take you there, if Johnnie lends me his car. Oh, Johnnie," she called, and Father Vikenty noticed for the first time the young man who had come in with her and was now absorbed in examining the iconostasis.

At the sound of Natasha's voice Johnnie swiftly turned around and hurried to her side. There was nothing unusual about his appearance, except for a certain softness about the dark eyes; they stood out in sharp contrast to the clear-cut features of this young and obviously well-to-do American. His clothes, of an expensive cut, were worn somewhat carelessly and loosely, leaving the movements of his body untrammeled; and his dark hair was rather closely cropped, to eliminate perhaps a few unruly and unwelcome waves that might have matched the eyes. "This is Father Vikenty, Johnnie. And, Father Vikenty, this is my friend Johnnie Stone."

Johnnie murmured the usual civilities, but Father Vikenty took his proffered hand in both of his and boomed out in his bad English, "Natasha's friend — my friend. That so?"

Johnnie laughed. He had a charming laugh. "Why, I hope so, Father." And obedient to the touch of Natasha's hand, turned around to be introduced to the others.

When they returned to Father Vikenty, there was a twinkle in the priest's eye that seemed to say, Another victim, eh? Ech, Natasha, my darling, be careful, don't burn yourself! And Natasha gave him back a half smile mingled with a little frown, as though to share in the joke and chide him at the same time. She then repeated to Johnnie in English what Father Vikenty had told her about the christening, while Father Vikenty watched him. "Look at the poor boy, he's hardly listening to what she's saying, he's simply drinking in her voice!" Natasha asked Johnnie

if she could borrow his car, and Johnnie said, "Of course, Natasha. Anything you say." Of course, of course, Father Vikenty chuckled to himself. What else could poor Johnnie say? He's a goner. I swear to God! But Natasha had changed the subject, speaking Russian again, and Johnnie had gone roaming about the church, examining the icons on the walls. "I really came here today at Mamma's request," she said. "You know the place she bought in Connecticut last summer? Well, they say the weather is going to clear by tomorrow, and my parents want to have the house blessed on Sunday."

Father Vikenty's eyes met Madame Pishnik's in mutual encouragement. He told Natasha he would be glad to come.

"Splendid," she said. "There is a train that gets there at three. Johnnie and I would have taken you in the car, but he is taking a carload of cousins on Sunday morning. My cousins of course," she laughed. "And I'm going out tomorrow afternoon after the christening. You know how much I've hurt my father's feelings. I really must make amends."

She tried to look penitent, but Father Vikenty saw no contrition in her eyes — "Those slanted almonds," as he called them. They were actually smiling, though her face remained solemn. She was referring to her long-standing tug-of-war with her father, which she had recently won. The old Prince had been incensed at Natasha's determination to live in an apartment of her own. But last August on her twenty-fifth birthday she had bullied him into giving an unwilling consent, and in September Natasha had moved to a small apartment in the East Eighties, two blocks away from her parents. This independent life of hers was a source of concern to Father Vikenty, who had never grown quite accustomed to think of his "little Natasha" as grown up; and there was, besides, her recklessness, her weakness for adulation, conquest, and success, which sometimes made him feel afraid for her. "Natasha, Natasha," he said, shaking his head. "You madcap!"

She looked up at him, mischievous and sly. "You have evil thoughts, Batiushka darling. The most, most evil thoughts!" She gave him a quick hug and turned to say goodbye to the others.

But Madame Pishnik barred the way. Her face pink with distress, she poured out her fears for the Concert-Ball. And Natasha laughed, promising to help. Calling Johnnie to her side, she repeated to him again in English what had been said in Russian. "It will be in the Club here, you know," she explained. "Might be fun." She tried to conceal her wink, but Father Vikenty saw it. He guessed that the allurement she was offering was of the kind derived from slumming parties, and this made him feel a little sad. But he said nothing. "Let's get a few friends together," Natasha continued with enthusiasm. "And let's get Millicent to make up a party."

It seemed to Father Vikenty that Johnnie's soft brown eyes grew wistful as he said, "Sure, if I'm still here."

"Oh, nonsense! You'll be here for another six months." And turning to Father Vikenty, "Johnnie, you see, is with the State Department. He thinks they will be sending him abroad soon. But they have been threatening to do so for the last three months! No, you may be sure we will both come, and we'll get his sister and her husband to come too."

"Oh, no, no! Americans no like," Madame Pishnik broke in, her English after thirty years being even worse than Father Vikenty's. "Here no elegant, no glamrr!"

But Natasha only laughed. And Johnnie laughed with her, throwing his head back. Father Vikenty liked his clear laugh. But it was the glance he intercepted that suddenly rendered him thoughtful: Johnnie's glance of amused understanding and patient resolve, which enveloped Natasha for an instant and then vanished. Father Vikenty took her by the arm and led her to the club door. "You know, Natasha, my dear, that Johnnie of yours is a good young man, he really is." His low, confidential tone imbued his words with a deeper meaning.

She stopped, looking up at him again, serious this time; her eyes grave, the way he liked them best. "Yes, Batiushka, he is good. Perhaps too good. Oh, it's all so complicated—" She sighed. And with a swift change of mood, a gaiety that was almost like a challenge, she exclaimed, "But life is such fun!"

He stood for a while, gazing at the door which had closed be-

hind the young couple, Natasha's last words still ringing in his ears. A breath of fresh air seemed to have been swept away with her. He felt old. He looked around at the others. Age — dogged, graceless, unromantic age — seemed to have closed in on them, too. Only the church is beautiful, eternally young and beautiful, he thought, glancing at the gold and silver icons and the twinkling lights. Everything else passes and fades. Madame Pishnik must have been a handsome, vivid girl in her day, a real Russian beauty; Miss Kastastrofoff must have had her freshness of youth, and Ivan Ivanovitch his virility. "Ech, and there was a time when I — !" he exclaimed to himself with a sudden swagger, the remnants of those fabulous biceps stirring in both arms. But this nostalgic gasconade was cut short by the sight of the Triumvirate, firm and solid; presenting an unusually united front, he thought. They were facing him now in a tight little group, Madame Pishnik loyally standing guard in the center to spare Miss Katastrofoff and Ivan Ivanovitch the unpleasantness of closer proximity.

"Well," he said, trying to sound cheerful, "everything seems to be taking shape. On Sunday I'll speak to the Tverskoys. On Wednesday Terenteeva has invited me to her birthday party. That'll give me an opportunity to have a word with her. And in between I'll pay a call on the Bourkevitches and see what can be done there."

He turned halfway to the door, anxious to get away, but Ivan Ivanovitch, the incurable moralizer, speaking in a tone of admonition which on his lips sounded downright rude, raised an accusing finger at him. "That's all very well, Father Vikenty, but I must confess I am surprised at you — making excuses for insults to the church and condoning the belittling of sacraments!" And in answer to Father Vikenty's bewildered stare, he continued with even greater acerbity, "Yes! When that guttersnipe, as Madame Pishnik so appropriately called him, put on his hat, right here, in church, you said he had a heart full of love, or words to that effect. And when, with much insolence, he mentioned psychotherapy, you encouraged him. You said you didn't mind if he indulged in his godless thoughts while you performed a sacra-

ment! Such sanction, coming from a priest, is passing strange to say the least. We know you meant it well, but what would people say if they heard about it? I may be the son of a simple peasant, but I can't let it go by in silence. I must protest against such undignified and unseemly behavior!"

The unity of the Triumvirate, Father Vikenty perceived, was shaken by this rude outburst. "The church warden is being tactless, as usual," Miss Katastrofoff put in. "But I do think — Oh, you are too lenient for your own good, dear Father Vikenty. Just as our poor Emperor was — My cousin Marie Katastrofoff always said — As maid-of-honor to the Empresses she had an entree into higher circles of course — She used to say, Unfortunate is the man who knows not how to be firm — Only she said it in French — "

"For heaven's sake, we are not discussing what maids-of-honor said about His Majesty the Emperor," Madame Pishnik exclaimed in exasperation. "Besides, it wasn't their business to say anything! And perhaps we had better hold our tongues too!" She drew herself up, but was unable to resist airing her views. "No! Since everyone here has expressed his views, I must express mine too. I agree with Ivan Ivanovitch on one point only. I don't see what love has to do with an act of premeditated disrespect to the church! But I do think it was pretty shrewd of Father Vikenty to say, 'You can think of psychotherapy and I will pray to God.' Yes, pretty shrewd," she repeated, anxious now to assuage the dispirited look she had caught in the priest's eye. "It made that young upstart blush!"

Strangely enough, this sudden championing of his cause was the thing that really hurt. Shrewd? He hadn't meant to be shrewd! He had been touched by Kolia's love for his wife and had expressed it as best he could. To call it shrewd was to belittle it somehow. And he certainly had had no intention of making Kolia blush.

But what was the use of explaining anything at this point? He would only make a worse muddle of it all. He felt very much alone all of a sudden. Guilty in a sense, too; guilty of never being able to express his deeper thoughts in a clear and concise way.

And that old feeling of inadequacy came creeping up to add its weight to his loneliness and guilt. "I should never have aspired to the priesthood. I should have remained a diakon, I should have remained subservient. Wisdom didn't come to me with my ordination. Perhaps it was against the will of God — ?" That it had been the Archbishop's will he knew well, but refused to put it to himself in that light. For he also knew that in the final count it had been his own vanity that had made him give in to the Archbishop. And look at the result. he said to himself with a quick, hopeless wave of his hand. Such an unsuccessful, blundering priest!

He turned to go. A chorus of voices sought to detain him: "Wait, I must speak to you about the Sisterhood," cried Madame Pishnik; "I was hoping to have a word with you in the office," wailed Miss Katastrofoff; "How about those extra large candles?" Ivan Ivanovitch barked. But Father Vikenty only shook his head. "No," he said. "I'm sorry. Dragoon is waiting for me."

4

HIS LONELINESS, and that feeling of inadequacy, clung to him as he walked the two blocks to his home; and Dragoon, sensitive to his master's moods, trotted behind him, occasionally sniffing the air but glancing neither right nor left. Father Vikenty knew that such moments of depression usually led to unwelcome excesses, but he felt incapable of doing anything about it; a kind of mental morass kept him bogged down. For once he didn't even speak to Dragoon, and this unusual taciturnity weighed heavily on the boxer. By the time they reached their house he had hung his head. In silent gloom they climbed a flight of well-trodden stairs, flanked by a chipped banister on one side and a dung-colored wall on the other, and stopped in front of their door. Above the doorbell — or rather what was left of it, for buttonless it gaped, displaying its little springlike entrails — an embossed visiting card proclaimed the name of the tenant: Very Rev. Vikenty A. Kadilov; and right under the name four additional words had been scribbled in pencil: "and Dragoon Vikentievitch Kadilov."

Father Vikenty unlocked the door and switched on the light. The room sprang out of the dark with its four busy corners and a wide stretch of empty floor space. But despite the meager furnishings, its spotless appearance came as a pleasant surprise after the sordidness of the outer passages and stairs; for Father Vikenty was very neat and tidy about his person and belongings, and the woman who came in to clean the apartment was conscientious and well trained. From force of habit he glanced at the four furnished corners to see if everything was in its proper place. Starting on his left and going clockwise, each corner had a name: Study, Bedroom, Chapel, and Dragoon's Chamber; a

desk, a chair, and a big armchair in the first; a bed and a night table in the second; numerous icons on the walls of the third, with a lighted image lamp suspended from a wall bracket; and in the fourth, the narrowest corner, the one squeezed in between the entrance door and a window, nothing but Dragoon's mattress. The sight of it all brought him no cheer. He felt even more alone now. He bent to unfasten Dragoon's collar; and the dolorous "Ech-mah" that escaped him — a cross between a sigh and a groan — proved to be Dragoon's undoing. With his belly close to the floor, he literally crawled to his corner and lay down on his mattress, gazing up with imploring eyes.

Father Vikenty took off his hat and coat, hung them on a hook near the door, and strolled across the room into the adjacent kitchen. There he switched on the light, brushed past the table on which he ate his meals, and went on to the refrigerator. But his thoughts kept traveling back. He tried to rein them in, gathering them under control. It was as if he were saying to himself, Probe the past: Search out the roots of your ineffectualness; and then, Stop probing. Let the dead bury the dead. You know what comes of disturbing them. But after every effort his thoughts would dash away with a renewal of vigor.

He opened the refrigerator and looked in. He saw a bottle of milk, some eggs, some bacon, a package of horse meat for Dragoon, and half a chicken, bought ready cooked at a delicatessen store. Chicken, he said to himself. We are having chicken for dinner, Vikenty. The phrase bounced about in his mind as though trying to find its place — We are having chicken for dinner, Vikenty — We are having chicken for dinner, Vikenty — Then, carried by its own momentum, it plunged into the distant past, and he found himself standing near an old-fashioned wood-burning stove in his mother's low-ceilinged kitchen.

"We are having chicken for dinner, Vikenty!" Chicken was a luxury in the poor struggling widow's life, and she raised her tired eyes to his to enjoy his surprise and gratification. She had prepared this treat on the last day of his Easter vacation; but he stood in front of her — big and clumsy, his forehead spotted with the unrequited desires of youth — and blushed a deep red, know-

ing he wouldn't be able to enjoy the chicken until he had told her all that was on his mind. His heart ached at the thought of hurting this tired little woman to whom he owed so much, yet at the same time it rejoiced in the freedom of his will, in his newly found self-assertion. He turned his face away to the window.

It was one of those days in early May when the Russian spring he had loved so well could be truly called an awakening and a flourish. All morning he had walked in the fields and woods — for his mother's little ramshackle house stood on the very edge of the provincial town in central Russia in which they lived — dreaming of his plans for the future and bracing himself for the hurt he knew they would bring his mother. But the knowledge of it had not made him waver; his mind had been firmly made up the night before. And the murmur of running waters, the rustle of young leaves, all those whisperings of spring seemed to have promised fulfilment. Tomorrow he would return to the seminary to attend his last term and prepare for his graduation. Yes, he would graduate. That much he would do for his mother, and for Tania, the girl he loved. But beyond that — no. It was his life, and he had to live it his own way.

He sat down to the midday meal — the only real meal his mother could afford to give him — and ate in silence; first the soup, then the chicken, feeling his mother's anxious, questioning eyes upon him. They made his food stick in his throat.

"What is the matter, Vikenty? Don't you like it?" she inquired at length.

"Mama — " He swallowed hard. "It isn't the food, it's what I've got to tell you that I don't like." He swallowed again. "Last night I went to the circus — "

"Vikenty! You looked at those wrestlers again!" She clasped her hands in despair.

His mother had guessed. She had seen the silent confession in his eyes and knew he had made up his mind to become a professional wrestler. She had known of course of his craze for the sport, and this possibility had long hung over her as a threat; now the determination in his eyes made it a certitude, and every

line in her care-worn face twitched as in pain. For it had always been her dream to see him some day in his father's place as proto-diakon of their cathedral; a dream that had kept her going through the bitter years of her widowhood. She had toiled and slaved, denying herself everything, in order to put him through the seminary and prepare him for the priesthood; and in the last few months, by sheer perseverance and disregard for slights and humiliations, drawing freely on her inexhaustible fountain of tears whenever her supplications seemed to fall on deaf ears, she had exhorted a promise from their local bishop to appoint Vikenty, upon his graduation, as junior diakon to the cathedral.

Diakons, those members of the priesthood not fully ordained, who could only assist the priests or bishops in the conducting of divine services, were a regular institution in the Eastern Orthodox Church; but diakons, prized for their voices and their ability to intone the liturgical prayers in an ever increasing volume until they finally rent the air with their magnificent bellowings, were a purely Russian breed; and proto-diakons were the supreme virtuosos among them, attached to cathedrals as attendants to higher prelates. Vikenty's father had acquired local fame with his voice, which, his admirers had predicted, would carry him far; very far; perhaps as far as the Tsar's palace. People used to come from neighboring towns and villages to hear him proclaim — for it was a case of proclaiming rather than saying — the liturgical prayers, especially the "Great Prayer" for the Tsar and the imperial family — the high spot in the Divine Liturgy for any diakon who took pride in his voice.

Vikenty had been too young to remember all this, but his mother had kept his father's image alive and vivid in his mind. "Never forget," she would say. "He was the Proto-Diakon Alexey Kadilov! In his long golden vestments he looked like an immense apparition from on High." And when he stationed himself in front of the altar, she would then go on to say, his right hand raised to heaven, and gave full vent to the Great Liturgical Prayer, his voice filled every nook and cranny of the vast cathedral, making every heart in it tremble and dissolve. Some local wits had even gone so far as to maintain — and this Vikenty had

learned from others, not from his mother — that between divine services the famous proto-diakon was kept in chains and then let loose to roar.

Vikenty had inherited his father's powerful physique and stentorian voice, and it was on this promising voice of his that his mother had pinned all her hopes. And now, finding her dreams crumbling around her and realizing that her sacrifices had all been in vain, tears gathered in her eyes and her clasped hands trembled visibly.

Quickly he knelt beside her and held her in his arms. "Mama, angel, dear precious soul, try to understand. I am afraid — I swear by all the saints, I'm afraid to be ordained, even as a diakon. I don't feel the call for it, except for my voice. I am young. I am strong. I've got hot blood in my veins!"

"But it's not as if you were being tonsured into monkhood," she wailed. "You've got Tania. And what will her father say when he hears of this? Oh, my God!" She clamped her hands to her cheeks and shuddered at the thought.

Vikenty felt uneasy. Tania's father, the severe and exacting archpriest of the cathedral, inspired him with awe. But Tania — He must not lose Tania. If she stuck to him, everything would be all right. That she loved him he knew. But was her love great enough to overcome her father's wrath and perhaps her own prejudices as well? It was a question that troubled him. He dismissed it however. That was something he would have to face in the near future — next week when Tania returned from the country. Now he must concentrate on his mother.

His arm was still upon her stooping shoulders. "Don't let the thought of Tania's father upset you, dearest. Greater and more terrifying men than Father Voznesensky have been provoked and have gotten over it. I for one won't let him stand in my way. I've got to follow my calling. Ah, Mama, how am I to explain it to you? You see, I want to wrestle. I want to match my strength with others. I want to overcome and conquer. Every muscle in me is crying out for it! And with my weight and strength I could become a great champion some day! And, Mama, that wouldn't prevent me from being an honest man. I swear to God!"

She had stopped crying. Her pale watery eyes were upon him now, reproachful and angry. "And bare your body in public, and play the fool to entertain the crowd? You, the son of Proto-Diakon Alexey Kadilov? For shame!" She pushed him away.

Somehow her anger made everything easier. But it didn't last. There was little anger, or any other kind of protest, left in the poor tired woman who had spent too many years knocking at closed doors and swallowing the bitter pills of humiliation for the sake of a dead and a living dream. And what happened next was shattering to Vikenty. He was back in his place, looking steadily at her across the table. "My mind is made up, Mama. Nothing will change it. But I need your blessing. Would you let me go without it?" And thrilled by the rosy visions of his future, his big chest began to heave and his eyes shone. "Ech, Mama, can't you see it? I can! Great champions lying conquered at my feet, and the world opening up before me. Not just our little world, our town and other provincial towns like it. No! Moscow! Petersburg! Just think of it! And later perhaps even London and New York! Mama, dear friend, you must understand. Wrestling isn't playing the fool. There is glory in wrestling. The Lord God himself wrestled with Jacob. And my greatest joy will lie in the knowledge that I have wrestled well!"

She sat very still, her shoulders sagging. Then into the pause she flung her sorrow. "And you will never, never deafen our ears and melt our hearts with your voice!" The silent flow of tears he had expected did not come. She bent her head over the edge of the table and broke into pitiful sobs.

The memory was too poignant. Like a spider scrambling up its thread to the ceiling, he drew himself back into his own kitchen on West One Hundred and Twenty-fourth Street and stared at the open refrigerator with unseeing eyes. Such a beast! Such a selfish, unfeeling animal I was! The objects in the refrigerator began to materialize in front of him, and he caught sight again of the package of horse meat. And I haven't changed. Fancy forgetting Dragoon's dinner! The poor thing must be half starved!

He picked up the package and went to the door, but at the sight of Dragoon, still lying on his mattress, nodding his head and

blinking his eyes in self-pity, he couldn't help chuckling. "Ech, Dragoonushka, you poor thing. Why should you be sorry for yourself? You have never overreached yourself, you have never pretended to be anything but a dog. It's only in my eyes that you are a creature of enchantment. Here, come! I'll give you your dinner."

Instantly Dragoon was frisking around him and jumping as high as he could to lick the tip of his nose, stealing at the same time a few clandestine sniffs at the package. "Eh-eh! What's your hurry, Dragoon. First you must let me prepare it the way it should be done." He piled the meat on Dragoon's plate and broke a raw egg on top of it. "That'll make your coat glossy." He cut a few boiled carrots into small pieces and threw them in. "Vitamins," he said. "Yes, Dragoon, they are good for you." Dragoon watched him with hungry eager eyes, wagging his hindquarters now and then, while a string of saliva descended slowly from the corner of his mouth to the floor. Father Vikenty then broke up a few dog biscuits, added a little water, and mixed the ingredients with a knife. "You like raw meat, Dragoonushka, don't you? I know you do. I, my friend, wouldn't touch it. No, not for anything in the world. But then, that's the difference between you and me. That's why you are a dog today, and I'm a priest. But don't let that embarrass you, Dragoonushka. It is proper for a dog to like it. And men who love good big doggies like you want them to be happy and strong. They feed them raw meat."

They feed them raw meat. The echoing words brought on a rush of memories he was unable to control, and the voice that had once pronounced them returned to caress his ears. "They feed them raw meat." It was Tania who had said it. Tania, that tiny little woman — then still a girl just turned seventeen — with her determined little mouth and enormous black eyes.

But there was so much that had preceded those words. He had known Tania for almost two years and had paid court to her with a kind of shy and clumsy reverence. On Sundays, when the weather was fine, they had sat listening to the band in the town park, and later he would get her away from the other girls and

walk her up and down a quiet alley, his heart swelling with pride. His schoolmates, catching sight of them, would nudge one another and laugh, "Look at the big bear courting a dainty little pug." For "tiny," "little," "dainty" was the only way to describe Tania, except for her big black eyes which reduced Vikenty to a pulp of silent and palpitating adolescence every time they looked at him with tenderness. Her dainty figure in the black and brown uniform of a girl's *gimnazia* was a delight to him; her tiny hands and feet filled him with ecstasy; and the sight of her little white neck brought a lump to his throat, so touching was it in its innocence. But he dared not hold her hand, for fear of offending her. Besides, she seemed so small and fragile he was afraid his big hands and awkward movements might bruise her. And when his passionate adoration would reach an unbearable pitch, he would clutch at his heart and burst into poetry, declaiming some love poem by Pushkin or Lermontov, to which she would listen attentively. And it was, no doubt, the undisguised eagerness of that dainty little ear that enabled him to pluck up sufficient courage one afternoon to ask her to marry him.

"Oh, Tatiana Nikanorovna," he exclaimed. He had never before used her full formal name, but he felt that the occasion called for it. And after an agonizing glottal stop, he started all over again in a desperate voice, "Oh, Tatiana Nikanorovna, save a drowning man! It's your hand I'm asking for, your hand!" He wanted to go down on one knee, but wasn't sure it was the right thing to do. And he remained standing, breathing heavily and shifting his heavy weight from one big foot to the other.

She glanced up at him slyly. "So big, so clumsy," she teased. "Is it surprising that he should be drowning?" But the look in her eyes told him that she loved everything about him — his size, his clumsiness, even the constellation of pimples on his forehead, that constant source of mortification — and it took his breath away. But when she said, with the air of a little queen conferring a favor, "I always intended to marry you"; adding after a short pause, "Vikousha," a caressing diminutive she must have thought up long before, all he could do was sweat.

Eight months went by, during which he visited her home as

her unofficial fiancé; for Tania had talked her parents, even her severe father, into accepting him as such. This was a feat in itself, for the Archpriest Voznesensky, who owned a house in town and a small property in the country — a thing unusual among the priesthood — had aimed, so it was said, at bigger game for his only daughter. But Tania had a way. And well Vikenty knew it. Several times during the course of the winter he returned to the subject of wrestling, telling her of his secret ambitions, and every time he got the same answer, "I would rather have you as a diakon." The answer contained no threat, no ultimatum, it merely stated her preference, but somehow it precluded any further discussions. During the week after Easter, when he had made up his mind, she had been away in the country visiting her grandmother. His attendance at the seminary had prevented him from seeing her immediately upon her return, but the very next Sunday he presented himself at her home. They were sitting on a stiff settee in the living room when he told her of his decision. She showed no emotion and little surprise; she just opened her eyes a little wider. He didn't know of course that his mother had beaten him to it: he thought her reserve was her own quiet way of accepting things. For a moment his anxieties were lulled. But when she said, "Vikenty" — not Vikousha, and this alarmed him — "I would rather have you as a diakon," he poured forth all the arguments he had used on his mother, not forgetting such high points as the wrestling of Jacob with the Lord. She listened with downcast eyes. When he was through, she smoothed out the little black apron of her school uniform and repeated the same sentence: "I would rather have you as a diakon."

Anger, fear, disappointment scorched his cheeks and stung his eyes. "Then you don't really love me, Tania. You refuse to marry me if I become a wrestler!"

She shook her head demurely. "I didn't say that. The alternative doesn't even arise. You could never be a wrestler, Vikousha. They feed them raw meat!"

To say that Vikenty was taken aback would be putting it mildly. His eyes almost popped out of their sockets. "Raw meat?" he cried. "Impossible!"

"Oh yes. I made enquiries. There is no doubt about it. They feed them raw meat and they are made to eat it."

Vikenty had no memory of the next two hours. He spent them running all over town tracking down the impresario, with whom he had almost signed up two weeks before after demonstrating his prowess as a wrestler. When he found the man, he collared him. "Do you feed raw meat to your wrestlers? Are they forced to eat it? Tell me! Tell me the truth!"

The man shook himself free. "Why of course," he laughed. "Raw meat makes them strong and brings out their ferocity."

Shaken by physical revulsion, and horrorstruck at the thought of eating raw meat and then making love to Tania, Vikenty roared into the face of the astounded impresario, "Who the devil do you think I am — a lion?"

Ten minutes later, on a bench in the most secluded part of the town park, he wept; and he knew not what gave greater impulse to his tears: the breaking up of his cherished dream or Tania's unshakable faith in his fastidiousness.

Later still, chastened and humbled, he knelt in front of his mother, begging her forgiveness and promising to become a diakon. She didn't wait to hear the end. Seizing him by the hand, she ran the entire way to Tania's house. And there he and Tania were made to kneel, while her parents, the tall gaunt Archpriest and his big fat wife — Vikenty never understood how Tania had come out so small and dainty — blessed them with an icon.

The following week they were officially betrothed. The actual wedding took place in the cathedral two months later, between the time of Vikenty's graduation and his ordination as a diakon. Now they stood side by side in the living room of her house, with only a few close relatives as witnesses, her father conducting the betrothal service. Vikenty was so moved he could hardly see or hear anything until the Archpriest made the sign of the cross over him with Tania's ring, saying: "The servant of God, Vikenty, is betrothed to the handmaid of God, Tatiana: In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

A rising tide of emotion almost choked him. Was it possible?

Was it possible that it should really be happening? Dimly he saw the Archpriest bless Tania with his ring, but the words that accompanied the movement came through to him clear and sharp: "The handmaid of God, Tatiana, is betrothed to the servant of God, Vikenty: In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Amen.

It has happened! he almost cried aloud. He stole a glance at Tania and saw that she, too, was deeply moved. Blushing and fumbling a little, they three times exchanged their rings. And when they were left alone at last, she looked up at him and kissed the ring on her finger. And he, trembling in every limb, bent down and kissed her on the lips.

5

THE MEMORY of that kiss sharpened the edge of his loneliness. He shook himself free of it. "No more," he groaned. "For God's sake no more!" He put Dragoon's plate down in a corner of the kitchen and watched him attacking his food with loud and greedy gulps. He tried to concentrate all his attention on him. "Dragoon, Dragoon! Such a gormandizer. Such a glutton. Honestly! Is it nice to gorge yourself in such a way and snort and grunt over your meal, I ask you?" Dragoon glanced up from his plate just long enough to jerk his head, as if to say, I can't help it, and I don't care; then descended upon his meal with an even greater measure of voracity. And Father Vikenty smiled. "Dragoon, Dragoonushka! I know, I know. You can't help it. It's those big jaws of yours. But you better watch out. Some day your greediness will be your undoing. Yes, it might be your undoing some day. Mark my words!" And after a smiling pause, "You know, your greediness is catching. It gives me the belly rumbles. My own appetite is rising. I swear to God!"

A minute later he was standing beside the gas range, warming up the chicken. Dragoon, having nuzzled his plate halfway up and down the kitchen floor in an effort to obtain the last delectable morsel, stationed himself in front of his master and performed his one great parlor trick. He poked Father Vikenty several times with his front paw and let out three short barks, one for each syllable of *Spa-si-bo*, the Russian word for "Thank you." Dragoon then puckered his mouth into a little o, which gave him a prissy look; and Father Vikenty, his loneliness forced into the background, broke into one of those soft good-natured laughs of his. "You are welcome, Dragoon, you are welcome, my dear."

Dragoon threw in an extra bark for good measure and sub-

sided on the floor, his nose tucked in between his front legs, his eyes still fixed on his master. "I know, I know. You fancy yourself as a vocalist. You expect me to praise your voice. Perhaps you think I'll compare you to Chaliapin?" Feeling safe from reminiscences with Chaliapin as his subject, he let his silent laugh spread from shoulders to belly. "Dragoon, you'll be the death of me yet! You have a fine blare of a voice, I'll grant you that. But it doesn't compare with Chaliapin's. Oh, no! But don't let that embarrass you, Dragoonushka. You weren't born in Russia, and that's no fault of yours. After all, it's neither surprising nor extraordinary that Chaliapin had such a magnificent voice — he came from the land of proto-diakons!"

He had switched to a perilous track, but, unsuspecting, trundled on, his vanity at the throttle. Clearing his throat, he took a few notes, testing his voice that had once shaken windowpanes in cathedrals. Much of its strength was gone, and some of its true quality, too; but it was still a powerful voice. "Ech, Dragoonushka, you should have heard me in my prime! Believe it or not, my dear, at such close quarters and in such a small room as this, you'd have stuck cotton wool into your ears, or gone deaf for the rest of your life. I swear to God!" He took another deep note; and before he knew it, he was intoning the last verse of the Great Liturgical Prayer: "Grant, O Lord, length of days, a peaceful life, health, salvation, and prosperity in all things — "

The gas stove, the chicken, Dragoon, all faded out of sight. He was standing again in the cathedral of his home town, ready for the greatest test of his career — a test that was to change the entire course of his life and tear him away from everyone he loved. And yet, with what hopes and prayers he had prepared himself for this test!

Tania and he had been married for five years, and their little girl, Lenochka, was almost four. For two years he had been the proto-diakon of the cathedral; and his whole appearance had undergone a change to suit his new dignity. No more pimples, no more adolescent awkwardness. His skin had become clear, of a rich texture; and his clumsiness had blossomed into a magnificent corpulence that gave him an air of majesty when he wore his

long vestments. According to custom he had grown a full beard and wore his hair long. It hung like a thick reddish mane down to his shoulders. Only in America was this leonine appearance to be toned down, his hair cut shorter, and his beard trimmed to a fine point.

In two years, as proto-diakon, he had lived up to all expectations. The fame of his voice had spread. Some people asserted that he had even outshone his father. And the test he was about to face would show whether they were right. It was December of 1916 — the last December of the Russian Empire. And the occasion was a solemn Te Deum in honor of the Emperor's name day. All the military and civilian dignitaries of the province, all the local nobility, all the rich merchants in town were to be present. But above all, a visiting prelate, a member of the Holy Synod that ruled the Russian Church, was to officiate that day. Vikenty had been recommended to the recently vacated position of proto-diakon in the Russian cathedral in New York, and he knew that as far as his final nomination was concerned, much depended on what the visiting prelate thought of his voice and manner.

A heavy cloud hung over Russia that winter, filling every heart with foreboding. News from the front grew steadily worse; rumblings of discontent rose up on all sides; the throne itself seemed to be tottering. The thought of escaping from impending disaster would never have crossed Vikenty's mind, but an official transfer was quite another matter; and America had begun to beckon to him as a haven of safety for Tania and a land of promise for Lenochka.

At home the night before he had rehearsed the liturgical prayers, giving full vent to his voice, so that Tania had laughingly clamped her hands to her ears. Lenochka had squealed with joy, clapping her hands in her delight; and he had held her close to his heart, kissing and hugging her while she had tugged at his beard. And Tania, in that endearing way of hers, in which a mocking note mingled with her love for him, had exclaimed, "Vikoushal you are not a father at all! You are a mother. Honestly you are! You'd feed her with your breast if you could!"

Later that night he had prayed with fervor, trying to be as detached about it as he could: "O Lord God, let it happen. Let it happen, Lord, for the sake of Tania and Lenochka." It seemed to him that a prayer on their behalf could not remain unheeded, and the emotion he experienced at the mention of their names convinced him of his own disinterestedness. In the morning, however, on the way to the cathedral, he had felt as nervous as any schoolboy before an exam, and Tania had teased him: "So big, so majestic, and so full of qualms. Vikousha, dear soul, I know the visiting Eminence can't help himself. He is bound to be impressed by you."

The Te Deum was drawing to its end. Surrounded by the clergy, the visiting prelate and the local archbishop sat enthroned behind the altar in all their glittering robes. Vikenty had already intoned a liturgical prayer, but he had purposely restrained his voice, reserving its full blast for the final prayer calling for many years of blessings on the Emperor and his House. He was standing behind one of the side doors of the iconostasis, waiting for his cue to come out in full view of the congregation. The door had been left ajar and he could see the cathedral packed with people. Clouds of incense rising through broad shafts of sunlight formed a kind of fluorescent pall that hung in mid-air, obliterating a whole section of the crowd. But in the front row he caught a glimpse of his family. His mother was a small woman, prematurely shrunken with grief and woes, but Tania was even smaller; and Lenochka, standing between them, looked tiny and cute in her squirrel-fur coat and bonnet, her big eyes staring with intense anticipation at the side door of the iconostasis through which her father was to appear at any moment. The sight of her eagerness brought tears to his eyes. "For your sake, little angel, I will outdo myself today." And as he said this, the visiting prelate rose to give the benediction, which was Vikenty's cue.

He came out, trying to keep his movements under control, mustering all the dignity his huge frame was capable of, and with slow steps went to the great central gates of the iconostasis, now open and disclosing the high altar to view. He placed him-

self with his face to the altar and raised his right hand, holding the end of his stole in the prescribed fashion. The eyes of the prelate were upon him. They seemed to transfix him. He felt a nervous tightening in his throat, and an instant of panic seized upon him. If he failed, there would be no haven of safety for Tania, no land of promise for Lenochka. He looked up at a holy picture of the Last Supper above the central gates. To Thee, Lord, I give my voice. Bless it for their sakes. And with this silent prayer on his lips, he began to intone: "To our most pious, most powerful Lord and Emperor Nikolai Alexandrovitch —"

Tania, as she told him later, stood petrified. He had started in a higher key than usual, but he himself was not aware of this. In the customary way he accentuated the last few syllables by augmenting the volume of his voice and raising it to a higher pitch, and then followed through with the second verse: "And to his consort, the most pious Lady Empress Alexandra Feodorovna —"

A second and a third verse followed: "And to his mother, the most pious Lady Empress Maria Feodorovna . . . And to his son, the most faithful Lord Heir, Tsesarevitch, and Grand Duke Alexei Nikolaievitch, and to the whole Reigning House —"

The end of each verse was marked by the same increase in volume and a further rise in key. And when it came to the last verse, Tania and his mother, trembling with suppressed excitement, clutched each other's hands, wondering if he could get through without gasping for air, without a break in his voice. In fact, the whole congregation held its breath. It seemed incredible that any human voice could have such a diapason and reach its ultimate pitch with so much power and force. But Vikenty went on, his voice clear, his tone gaining in strength, "Grant, O Lord, length of days, a peaceful life, health, salvation, and prosperity in all things; and preserve them for —"

A barely audible pause, and his whole body strained to its utmost capacity. The veins stood out like thick cords on his neck and temples. And from the very pit of his stomach the final blast surged up through wide open larynx and resonant palate. Thus

propelled, the words came thundering out — "MA-NY YE-ARS!!" And from the rattle of small windowpanes and the tinkling of crystal chandeliers the choir picked them up and carried them to the dome of the cathedral — "Many years, Many years, Many years — "

A silent yet almost palpable sigh escaped the crowd. And Vikenty knew his success had been complete by the smile his severe father-in-law gave him when he returned behind the iconostasis. A few months later, in March, shortly after the abdication of the Emperor, the long-awaited appointment finally came through. But with it came a staggering blow. He was to proceed to New York alone. The church authorities deemed it inadvisable for his wife and child to undertake so long a voyage in wartime. They would join him at some later date. In his despair he cried out against heaven, but the resiliency of his faith soon brought him back into submission. He had prayed for this transfer and his prayer had been granted: the final outcome was in the hands of the Lord. There was no going back on it now; and Tania had urged him on: "It won't be long, Vikousha. Just a short probation, dearest, and we will be together again."

— Just a short probation, dearest. And we will be together again.

The words often came to haunt him, sometimes as one, sometimes as two separate sentences. The first half — Just a short probation, dearest — seemed to stand on its own, unrelated and unattached, and the resignation in it sustained rather than depressed him; the second half — And we will be together again — seemed to hold an esoteric promise of future bliss. But when they came strung together, as they did now, the memory of the long tragic wait that had followed would rise up, black and ominous. He had received over a dozen letters from Tania in the first ten months of their separation, but after that not a line, not a word. Nothing. He had waited, waited in vain, frantic with anxiety and fear for his wife and child. The Iron Curtain had descended, never to disclose their ultimate fate.

He sat at the kitchen table now, powerless against the memories that assaulted him, crushed him. The cave-in he had dreaded had occurred suddenly, as it always did. There were so many

memories that had caused it to crumble: not only the loss of his dear ones — that he could accept as the inevitable though inexplicable will of God — but there were his prayers for the transfer to New York, which appeared to him now as the height of egotism; and his departure alone without any real effort to force the issue; and finally — and this weighed heaviest on his conscience — his consent to become a priest — a dignity of which he had felt himself unworthy. He was unable to pray. He had tried, only to find the words of his prayers transmuted into thoughts devoid of worth, or degenerated into a meaningless mumble. And all he longed for now was oblivion. His chicken had remained untouched. Tania's faded letters lay strewn all over the table. And a half-gallon bottle of cheap red wine, already drained of some of its contents, stood in front of him, the sole center of attraction.

With shaking hands he raised the heavy bottle and refilled his glass. "Even if you had the proof of your wife's death, Father Proto-Diakon, you couldn't marry again. You know the laws of the church. So why not respond to our needs and be ordained as a priest — ?" Huh! It was easy for His Eminence to say that. He had never any taste for life!

He brought his fist down on the table, as though to crush the stirring word — priest. The bishop had been right, a man once ordained could not marry again. Yet it had seemed to him that to be a diakon was one thing, to be a priest another. Besides, he was a diakon. The thing had been done by his mother and Tania, and there was no changing it. But to become a priest — ! A priest should be a shepherd, a guiding light, a spiritual pillar; and how was he to become all that with his aches and flames and longings? "I'd be a fraud! A fraud, that's what I'd be!"

Four times in one month he had faced the bishop on this issue, and four times he had been told to think it over for a week and come back. No more priests were being sent from Russia — nor would they have been accepted, coming from the Bolsheviks — and as a result the Russian Church in the United States had found itself short of priests, while the Russian population, owing to the advent of bolshevism, had grown considerably. Bishop Sofrony, then suffragan bishop — later to be promoted to the

rank of archbishop — had made up his mind to have Vikenty Kadilov fully ordained and appointed as priest of the Church of the Transfiguration, about to be consecrated that year. And Father Vikenty had gone to face him once more with a sinking heart. He had secretly feared him from the very start; for there was a cold, chilling quality about the man that was discomforting. Born Sergei Plotnikov, the son of a millionaire Moscow merchant, Bishop Sofrony, it was said, had in his early youth led a wild and dissolute life. After a disappointment in love — or perhaps upon the discovery of some dreadful blemish in himself — he had become a monk under the name of Sofrony. Years of severe asceticism, and his father's rich donations to the church, had catapulted him into prominence. At the age of thirty-five — a thing unusual in those days — he had been ordained a bishop and sent to America. His thin features bore the marks of his ascetic life, but it was his deep-set eyes, always probing and challenging, that Father Vikenty had found disturbing. He could never return their gaze; and when he did, he had to stare.

Bishop Sofrony's life, ever since he had become a monk, had been an exemplary one, never deviating a fraction from the strict monastic rules and orders. Yet Father Vikenty had never felt any saintliness about him, only a singleness of purpose, and, strange to say, a kind of cold, inarticulate wrath. And he had dreaded this fifth interview, afraid he would not be able to withstand the pressure put upon him; knowing, in fact, that he would not. For new ambitions, both tempting and distressing, were rising within him.

"Have you made up your mind?" the bishop asked abruptly, after Father Vikenty had received his blessing and had kissed his hand, according to custom.

"I can't — I can't — Have pity on me, Your Reverence!" And as a last argument, his eyes filled with tears, "How could I ever give absolution when I'm such a sinner myself?"

"Take the sins of the penitents upon you."

This great mystical side of the Christian confessional, too often overlooked in the modern church, struck Father Vikenty with awe. Yet it tempted and tantalized him, too. And unable to bear it any longer, feeling himself sinking, giving in to a new, a terrify-

ing temptation, he suddenly fell on his knees with a heavy thud and prostrated himself in front of the bishop. "I'm not fit, not fit — have mercy on me, my lord — !"

The sight of this big strong man lying at his feet, begging for mercy, brought a strange glitter to the bishop's eyes. Father Vikenty did not see it; and even if he had, his innocent mind could never have fathomed the bishop's intricate and tortured soul. When he looked up again, the bishop's steel-gray eyes were like two sharp blades of anger. He stamped his foot. "Miserable creature! How dare you resist the will of God?"

With a deep sigh Father Vikenty stood up. "If it's the will of God, my lord, who am I to resist it?" He crossed himself. "Thy will be done," he murmured in a fervor prompted by apprehension.

And the bishop, with an uncanny insight into the weaknesses of the human heart, fanned Father Vikenty's newly born ambitions, "You are still hoping — We are all hoping your wife will be found some day. Think of her joy and pride when she joins you and finds that you are a priest."

— Just a short probation, dearest, and we will be together again.

Father Vikenty rose to his feet, picked up his glass and bottle, and went unsteadily into the next room, to the corner known as his study. Dragoon, who had felt ill at ease all this time, came up and tentatively licked his hand. But Father Vikenty did not even feel the caress. He poured himself a full glass of wine and sank into the big armchair. And Dragoon, his existence thus denied, sought refuge on his mattress.

Father Vikenty closed his eyes, — Just a short probation, dearest, and we will be together again.

Yes, everything would have been different if Tania had been with him. There would have been lacy curtains at the windows, and lace doilies on the backs of the chairs; an embroidered spread on the bed, and many, many pillows, one stacked on top of the other, like a softened, fattened Chinese pagoda. The thought of Tania lying in bed with him made him throw his head against the back of the armchair and stare fixedly at the ceiling. But the vision of Tania was no longer unalloyed. It had the dark

eyes of Terenteeva, that Russian actress who sometimes haunted his dreams, and the big soft breasts of a woman who had once been more than a dream to him at night and the cause of nightmarish remorses by day. He severed his eyes from the ceiling, and groaning, buried his head in his hands. "Oh, God! Not that! 'Don't let me fall that low!" He was staring now at the icons in the opposite corner, his lips racing through the Lord's Prayer in an empty streak of words, "Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come thy will be done just a short probation dearest and we will be together again — "

Horrorstruck, he sat motionless for a moment. "Satan! Satan is on my tongue. I'll drown you, you horny beast!" He drained his glass at a gulp, refilled it, and drained it again. Everything became blurred for a while. There was a loud buzzing in his ears. Then, through the clearing fog, he saw Lenochka standing in her squirrel-fur coat and bonnet, her big eyes so very eager — Where was she now? What was she like? Was she a middle-aged woman with children of her own? or had the Red Terror thrown her into the street, a motherless child without a name? The thought of Lenochka, wandering with a band of those lost children of the Soviet Union, half starved, committing crimes, perishing perhaps of some foul disease, or lingering unchastened in some prison camp, turned his whole inside out. He almost retched. He stood up, and staggering across the room, fell on his bed and sobbed like a child.

This was Dragoon's moment. Ordinarily he scarcely dared approach the bed, but when his master was like this, everything was permissible. In two bounds he was on the bed beside Father Vikenty, licking his face. And Father Vikenty looked at him lovingly through his tears. "Dragoon, Dragoonushka. You angel dog. Yes, yes. I have you. What would I do without you?" He put his arm around Dragoon, and all his tenderness for Lenochka, so long denied him, blossomed in that embrace. He closed his eyes, still hugging Dragoon. He felt Dragoon's soft warm tongue on the tip of his nose. He mumbled, "And we will all be together again." And then he slept.

6

"TFU! Such obscenity! Shame and disgrace!" However much Ivan Ivanovitch may have fancied himself as the next best thing to an avenging angel, he still looked like something furious and dwarfish out of hell as he stood in the middle of the room, glaring at the sprawling, fully clad figure of Father Vikenty on the bed with the dog by his side. Dragoon rolled over on his back, his front legs thrust out, his hind legs wide open, in a pose of complete abandonment; and his big mouth spread from ear to ear in an impish grin. "You shameless mutt! You gorilla, you! Get down at once!" Ivan Ivanovitch took a step forward with the intention of pushing him off the bed, but the growl that met him was at once a warning and a threat. He stopped, and prudently kept his distance. "Tfu!" he said again, pretending to spit in disgust.

Father Vikenty was watching him through tiny slits. A second later, his eyelids propped by amazement, he stared at Dragoon; and Dragoon, seeing the lucidity creeping through the blur in his master's eyes, slid to the floor and trotted to his mattress.

"Do you know what time it is?" Ivan Ivanovitch asked. "It's almost eleven. In three quarters of an hour Princess Natasha will be waiting for us at the church!"

Natasha, the christening at Kolia Strelkin's, all his immediate duties came back to Father Vikenty, bringing him to a sitting posture. He had to clutch the small of his back though, and groan a little as he sat up. Slowly he swung his legs over the side of the bed, trying to appear matter of fact. "Yes, Ivan Ivanovitch. We shall baptize that infant today."

"And a fine sight you'll be at the font! Just look at yourself. You've lost all human aspect!"

And indeed, with his eyes puffed, his hair on edge, his beard disheveled, Father Vikenty did look like a disreputable old lion. The lion pondered. But as various facets of his predicament presented themselves — Ivan Ivanovitch's inevitable report to Archbishop Sofrony, the possible linking of his present condition with his scrutiny of the wrestling match poster the night before — the lion grew sheepish. On the defensive now, hopelessly and transparently so, like some young culprit caught after hours and off bounds by his housemaster, he cried out, "I didn't go anywhere last night, Ivan Ivanovitch. I stayed right here all by myself."

But Ivan Ivanovitch only shook his head and pointed threateningly at the half-empty bottle on the desk. "Have you no fear of God? Have you no respect for the office you hold in His name? What does this mean?" He thrust his hand under Father Vikenty's nose, and the latter saw his own calling card, the one that had been tacked on the doorbell. "What does it mean, I ask you? This! This!" A stubby finger with a gnarled nail pointed out the words, "and Dragoon Vikentievitch Kadilov." "The name of an animal right under the words 'Very Reverend'! And it's in your hand. I recognize the scrawl!"

"But I didn't do that last night — "

"What difference does that make? The ignoble fact remains. You gave the animal your name. You proclaimed him your son, publicly, in front of all your neighbors! And did you stop to think when you did it who his mother was?" At any other time Father Vikenty might have laughed, but the morning-after fumes, that were playing havoc with his brain, made him screw up his face and groan. Ivan Ivanovitch mistook this for a moan of penitence and raised his voice to a higher pitch of indignation. "And now you let that animal share your bed. Tfu!"

He slipped the card into his pocket to serve, no doubt, as Exhibit A when he presented the case to the Archbishop. "Where do you keep your visiting cards, Father Vikenty? I must replace this one."

"Oh, leave me alone — ! There — in the top right drawer of my desk."

Ivan Ivanovitch opened the drawer, fished out a card, and went outside. But before leaving he stopped and glared at Dragoon.

"This animal is always leading you into temptation. The sooner you get rid of him the better it will be."

Father Vikenty tiptoed across the room to Dragoon's corner and patted him on the head. "Don't you worry, Dragoonushka. I will never get rid of you. Such a preposterous suggestion. I swear to God! We are in the doghouse together, and there we will stay together. Nothing can ever separate us, not even that mean trick you played on me this morning, you rascal! But there now — Yes, I know, I know. It was an excess of love."

He had to go through the kitchen to get to the bathroom, which was also his dressing room — he kept all his clothes there. The uneaten chicken and Tania's faded letters were still on the table, but he didn't notice them. He hurried toward the bathroom to get away from Ivan Ivanovitch, but his unwanted guest caught up with him just as his hand was reaching for the doorknob. And straight from the threshold Ivan Ivanovitch's eyes pounced on the chicken.

Father Vikenty paused, at once irritated and amused; but something happened to the little man: his eyes dashed from the chicken to the letters, rummaged among them for a second, and then stood still. He went up closer. He stared. And suddenly his face broke. "Ech, Batiushka! What the devil won't toy with — "

Emotion sat precariously on his coarse features, as though not sure what would happen to it next; yet its appearance had come like an impact and had made Father Vikenty look the other way. When he turned to him again, Ivan Ivanovitch was picking up the letters one by one, carefully stacking them together. And he handed them to Father Vikenty, avoiding the priest's eyes.

"Yes, what the devil won't toy with — Look at my ear, for instance." Father Vikenty knew all about his cauliflower ear, but he let him talk. "As you know, my wife was from my own village. Our fathers used to till their land together. I had known her since she was that high. But once a bitch, always a bitch! I caught her with another man, copulating like two wild beasts. All my soul came to a sudden boil. Revenge, it shrieked. But he was too strong and too big for me — But enough of this," he suddenly cried, as though in this cry he hoped to deafen the

pain of his mortification. "Go and make yourself presentable. I'll prepare your breakfast for you."

"Oh, don't bother — I don't feel like eating — "

"What? And perform the holy sacrament of baptism, dousing the Holy Ghost with your sour breath?"

Father Vikenty took refuge in the bathroom: What a man, what a man. Sometimes I could just take him and — Och, but what's the use? Somewhere under it all he has a heart. The way he looked at those letters. He even forgot to mention My Lord Sofrony. And for that I say, Thank you, Ivan Ivanovitch, thank you.

He knew that sooner or later Ivan Ivanovitch would be unable to resist the temptation and would make a report on his findings to the Archbishop — to save the priest's soul, as he would put it to himself. But somehow, the fact that Tania's letters had made him forget to threaten to do so touched Father Vikenty. He felt better. His headache was gone. In a deep voice he intoned a liturgical prayer as he washed and dressed. Whiffs of frying bacon reached him through the chinks in the door, whetting the appetite he had thought dead. And when he came out into the kitchen, the remnants of last night's debauch had been cleared away — the chicken put back in the refrigerator, the half-gallon bottle, its lid screwed on, placed on the shelf where it belonged. And Ivan Ivanovitch, a smug smile on his thick lips, was standing near the table on which he had set a glass of hot tea and a plate of fried eggs and bacon. But Father Vikenty stood still, glancing into the next room, meeting Dragoon's anxious eyes. He hesitated, then turned to the little man. "Be a friend to the end, Ivan Ivanovitch. Walk Dragoon around the block. I won't have time to do it, and the poor thing is going to be locked in here all day."

An angry grunt escaped Ivan Ivanovitch, but he made no further protest. He followed Father Vikenty into the next room and stood by, sulky, while the latter slipped the collar round Dragoon's neck. Dragoon looked sulky, too. He kept his eyes averted. And the man and the dog left the room, keeping as far apart as the leash would permit.

Not everything that walks on two legs is human, so forgive me God, was Father Vikenty's concomitant flash as he watched them

go out. Then he shut the door. On the way back to the kitchen he stopped in front of the icons, crossed himself, and bowed low from the waist, closing his eyes. "O Lord, forgive my last night's befuddlement. In my pride I indulged in the spirit of loneliness and dejection. Forgive me, O Lord. Deliver me from pride, anger, and irritation. Teach me always to perceive my own faults and never to condemn others. Especially Ivan Ivanovitch. Amen."

Twenty minutes later Father Vikenty and Ivan Ivanovitch — "Me and my shadow," as Natasha had once nicknamed them in fun — were being driven by her to the West Side in Johnnie Stone's shining white Cadillac; and Father Vikenty's "I'm eaten up with curiosity to see how these former Sovietchiks live," was seconded by Natasha's eager "So 'm I," and Ivan Ivanovitch's dubious grunt, for none of them had ever before been to the home of former Soviet citizens.

The address given by Kolia Strelkin proved to be a big apartment house with an entrance just off Riverside Drive. They entered a spacious lobby which, like so many apartment-house lobbies on upper Riverside Drive, seemed specially designed to match Grant's Tomb; except that the profusion of sham marble on the columns and walls had a papier-mâché effect and appeared singularly wasted without some ballet dancer pirouetting and flying from column to column in the gorgeous attire of the Blue Bird. And as though to strengthen this stagelike effect, all make-believe ended abruptly behind the elevator doors. Here everything was functional, shabby, and unadorned. The elevator itself was tinny and much abused by dents and scratches, and through its open latticework the smell of stale cooking and unwashed Negro bodies rose from the service passages and caterer's quarters in the basement.

Their curiosity grew by the second — almost to the intensity of excitement in Natasha's case — as the elevator made its slow and somewhat rickety ascent. It was the mysterious figure of Boukashov that intrigued them most, that former Soviet bureaucrat who had made such a sensational escape a couple of years before. Remembering Kolia's assertion that Boukashov was still guarded by the F.B.I., they had half expected to find suspicious eyes watching them out of dark corners, but they had seen no

one; and the small colored elevator man who said, "Stral-keen? Yas, sir. Three-F," and then began to hum a tune, could scarcely have offered any adequate protection. Nor did he stay to watch them when they had reached the third floor. The elevator doors closed behind them, the elevator went on its downward trip with a rumble and clatter of outmoded machinery, and they were left alone in a long corridor, facing a scribbled inscription on the wall — "Here Walter met Amy." Under it a meticulous hand had penciled in Russian, "How uncultured! The defacing of walls is a barbarous habit. And in any event who cares if Valter met some wench here? Such conceit!" The author of this indignant ratiocination had had no intention of remaining anonymous either; he had signed his initials — K.S. — adding, as a profound afterthought, "It only goes to show to what uncultured extremes unrestrained freedom can plunge a man!"

Father Vikenty and Natasha exchanged amused glances. "Ech, poor Kolia," Father Vikenty laughed, "that enigmatic Russian soul. Fleeing from the rod and hankering after it."

But Ivan Ivanovich saw neither the humor nor the incongruity of it all. He had been standing a little apart, carrying a suitcase with Father Vikenty's vestments, a Bible, a cross, a bottle of holy water, and a few other articles the priest would require for the performance of the baptismal service. Now he puffed up his chest and thrust out his lower lip. "He's right. It is uncultured to scribble on walls. But he better not start running this country down. If he doesn't like it here, let him go back where he came from!"

Father Vikenty met the quick look Natasha gave him with an eye full of secret chuckles, and Natasha burst out laughing. She couldn't help it. For years Ivan Ivanovitch had complained about this and that, finding little to his taste in the States; now he had swung to the extremes of patriotism. "What's so funny about it?" he asked in a piqued voice.

"Oh, nothing, nothing — " Natasha turned away from the wall and Father Vikenty tried to smooth the ruffled feathers, "At least Kolia has admitted that we have freedom here."

The sight of the long and dreary corridor with rows of doors on either side of it brought back to Natasha the spirit of adven-

ture and suppressed excitement she had experienced in the elevator. She put her hand on Father Vikenty's arm. "I feel like a conspirator or something, don't you? And I'm glad it wasn't Boukashov who wrote that nonsense. I'd no longer be in the least bit interested to see him if he had."

They found apartment 3-F at the end of the corridor. It had a substantial door with a spy hole in it. Muffled voices, indubitably Russian, reached them from within. Natasha rang the bell. She was amply rewarded now for whatever disappointment she may have previously felt at the lack of mystery and precautions, for with the ring of the bell the voices ceased, and in the silence that followed, stealthy footsteps came creeping to the door. Someone peered at them through the spy hole. "It's okay, Kolia," Father Vikenty boomed out. "The godparents and the clergy are here. Get the infant ready!"

Natasha swallowed a giggle. "You make us sound like cannibals, Batiushka," she whispered.

"God be with you, Natasha, my dear, what are you saying?" And raising his voice again into the silence that seemed to push its way at them through the closed door, he cried, "What is the matter, Kolia? You make me feel badly. My voice must be utterly ruined if you can suspect anyone else of having one like it!"

This appeal seemed to work, though slowly. They heard the lock turn twice; then a bolt was drawn back; then another; then the door opened a fraction, still held by a chain, and they saw Kolia, or rather a part of him — half a nose and one eye that went roaming round and round in its narrowed field of vision. "Anyone else with you?" he queried suspiciously.

"Why bless you, Kolia, of course not! Who else could there be? You told us to bring no one."

When Kolia finally unchained the door, he opened it just wide enough to admit them one by one, then slammed it behind them.

"So many precautions." Father Vikenty laughed. "It's almost frightening."

"Never too many for a man of importance," was the curt reply, the marks of Soviet training standing out for all to see. "You might have betrayed us. After all, I don't know you."

Father Vikenty saw Ivan Ivanovitch's jaw getting set for a snap

and he hurriedly put in, "That's quite true. But we will soon remedy it. In less than an hour you'll know all there is to know about me, Kolia."

From the small vestibule in which they were standing Father Vikenty's first impression was of a big bare room with a multitude of flowers at the three windows. That must be little Ketevana's touch, he thought. In front of the central window box, in which geraniums and petunias of different shades seemed to be all blooming at once, a font had been improvised by placing a wash-basin on a table and covering it all with a white sheet. A closer scrutiny of the room revealed a battered sofa near one of the walls, a somewhat dilapidated armchair near another, a dining alcove on the left with a plain kitchen table in it and a few kitchen chairs, and on the right an expensive TV set almost half as large as the dining alcove. Everything went into that TV set, he said to himself. And why not? A source of pleasure, and a sign of culture, too, no doubt —

The table in the alcove was set for six. Father Vikenty made a quick mental calculation: "Natasha, Ivan Ivanovitch, Kolia, Ketevena, myself, and I suppose Boukashov. Yes, that makes six. Oh-oh! Kolia intends to regale us with a meal for all his boorishness. I bet that, too, is little Ketevana's touch!" For some reason or other, from the very start, when Kolia had first spoken of her in church, Father Vikenty had pictured Ketevana as a small woman, perhaps a little like Tania; and a few seconds later, as Ketevana herself appeared from around the corner on the left, carrying the baby, he found he had been right. There was a doll-like loveliness about her — a finely chiseled nose, a small mouth, well rounded, well-traced dark eyebrows. But her main charm lay in her eyes — "The gentle eyes of a doe," as Father Vikenty put it — and in a bearing at once diffident and dignified, so often to be found among women of the Caucasus. She came forward, a shy smile on her lips, as though to invite everyone's admiration for her child.

"Is this your Ketevana, Kolia? How lovely she is. A real beauty. Isn't she, Natasha?" Father Vikenty was trying to draw Natasha's attention away from a door on the right, on which her expectant

gaze had been fixed for the last few seconds. Natasha laughed a little at her own bad manners and came swiftly toward him to make Ketevana's acquaintance.

"And this is the baby, eh?" Father Vikenty went on. "How old is she, Ketevana? You don't mind my calling you Ketevana, do you? You are so young and I am an old man. Isn't that so? How old did you say she was — ? Two months? Good. And what are we going to call her?" Ketevana's answers came in barely audible whispers. "Nina?" he repeated after her. "A very nice name indeed."

"It was her mother's name," Kolia put in.

"A good name. A very good name. And you'll soon be celebrating her name day — the fourteenth of January old style, the twenty-seventh of January here. Yes, an excellent name. And a wonderful patron saint — Saint Nina, the Enlightener of Georgia."

"Is that what you call her?" Kolia exclaimed with derision. "Enlightener of Georgia! She might have saved herself the trouble for all we got out of there — Stalin, Beria — "

The color rose to Ketevana's cheeks. "Oh, Kolia," she murmured, "don't talk like that in front of the priest and the godparents. Saint Nina lived over fifteen hundred years ago."

"You mean time enough for the enlightenment to have worn off?"

Ketevana blushed a deep red now. "Don't talk like that, Kolia."

The pleading in her eyes altered Kolia's whole expression. A movement as of pity and remorse jerked his head slightly to one side. He took a step forward and touched her hand. "There now. I won't, I won't. Today we are having everything your way. But all the same I'm glad you are an Armenian and not a Georgian. No possible relationship, you know — And now, Ketevanochka, give the baby to the godmother."

Smilingly Natasha took the proffered child, while Kolia turned to Father Vikenty. The latter, with Ivan Ivanovitch's help, was unpacking the suitcase. "Ketevana tells me that in your church parents are not supposed to be present at a christening."

There was a touch of speculation in Father Vikenty's eyes. Was this to be a new source of resentment? Another chip for

Kolia's shoulder? "That used to be the custom in Russia in the old days," he said. "It had a symbolic meaning. You see, at a christening godparents are supposed to take over in the spirit, and the idea was to make them more important. No one closer to the child was supposed to be present. But it was only a custom, Kolia. Not a law of the church. You need not go."

Kolia heard him out, his face unyielding. "I'd rather," he said at last. "I don't want to look at it." And taking Ketevana by the hand, he led her out through the dining alcove to what Father Vikenty guessed must be the kitchen.

7

TO FATHER VIKENTY all religious services were sacred, every prayer in them a path to a direct communion with God; yet this particular christening started out with a flavor of sanctity and mystery all its own. There he was, alone with the sponsors and the infant, in a strange room, baptizing a strange child, with none of the usual light shifting of feet and discreet coughing behind him to attest to a silent solemn gathering. It's as if the infant had been dropped from heaven into our midst, he thought. And it seemed to him that after every prayer and invocation a mystical silence enveloped them, tracing a ring of isolation, of holy solitude around them.

The feeling came upon him with marked strength during the ancient ritual of the repudiation of the devil, with its graphic illustration of loathing and contempt. They turned their backs to the font and his voice rang out through the silence: "Dost thou renounce Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his service, and all his pride?" And after a short pause Natasha and Ivan Ivanovitch murmured the response on behalf of the infant: "I do."

"Hast thou renounced Satan?" his voice called out again. And again, after a fraction of a pause, the murmured answer: "I have."

"Breathe and spit on him."

Both Natasha and Ivan Ivanovitch put real feeling into the act. They bent slightly forward, pretending to spit — Natasha out of the corner of her mouth, an expression of utter disgust on her face; Ivan Ivanovitch with his lips bunched together, as though Satan himself were cringing at his feet and he were aiming at his nose.

The ritual of the espousal and glorification of Christ followed

immediately. To perform it they turned to the font once more, and he called upon them to unite themselves with Christ and to believe in Him as their God and their King.

These rituals, evocative to some minds of pagan rites, were to him a pure enactment of faith; a refutal of the lower instincts in man, an affirmation of man's ultimate spiritual solvency. And it was with a new fervor that he began to recite the Credo: "I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible — "

The enchanted circle held for a while. And when he blessed the water, tracing the sign of the cross on it with his fingers, the delicate pencilings of sunlight that fell on the font appeared to him as a blessing from on high.

"We pray thee, O Lord, that every aerial and obscure phantom withdraw itself from us — " He began to recite the prescribed prayer with a fresh renewal of fervor, when a slight clicking of a door behind him resounded through his brain like a sharp crack. The circle broke, and an alien presence made itself felt in the room. When he turned to anoint the child, he caught sight of the intruder (he guessed at once that it was Boukashov) — a solid square man of forty, with a handsome smooth face — almost too smooth, he thought at the time — and a pair of steady eyes that watched his every movement. It was but a glimpse. In the next few minutes the screams of the awakened child occupied his whole attention, as he took it from Natasha's arms and carried it to the font and immersed it in the water, saying, "The handmaid of God, Nina, is baptized in the name of the Father, Amen. And of the Son, Amen. And of the Holy Spirit, Amen."

But when he returned the child to Natasha, he became aware of the newcomer again. The naked curiosity in the man's eyes was like an awl. This, and the curiosity which he knew flowed from Natasha in return, pierced the last remnants of the holy solitude. No longer alone now with the sponsors, the infants, and his God, he suddenly felt ill at ease, as though thrust of a sudden, an unskilled performer, into the limelight of a stage, in full view of a critical audience. He had never experienced such a sensation before, never at least while conducting a divine service, and it disturbed him profoundly. What am I doing? Degrading a

holy moment with human vanity! Is this a punishment for last night? A rising tide of indignation at his own lack of spiritual serenity and detachment brought on a wave of self-assertion; a compulsion to combat the skepticism he saw in Boukashov's eyes, to argue, to convince, to refute. And when he began to read the lesson from the Epistle to the Romans, he didn't just read it, he started a debate. Plunging headlong into dialectical oratory for the benefit of a skeptical listener, he took upon himself the words of the Scriptures, putting into them all the heat and force of persuasion: "Know ye not that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ, were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life — "

But gradually, as the reading drew to an end, the violence of persuasion left him, and with it the desire to confute and confound, and perhaps convert; leaving behind it a slight residue of embarrassment and shame. A text from the Gospels followed. He tried to read it for his own edification, forgetting about the others, but the last words of the text — "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" — failed to evoke in him the usual wonder and joy. And despite all his efforts, the second half of the service remained an empty performance. In sorrowful humility he accepted this as a sign of his unworthiness. How else could it be after last night and all those other nights of my life? But one thing he did not know, could never have known: he was himself again, that simple striving man, in whom the old and the new were movingly, humanly blended; who did not have to stand for anything, who just was.

He gave the final benediction and waited, holding a big silver-gilt cross in his right hand, a shy yet encouraging smile spreading through his beard, as Boukashov moved across the room toward him. He could still see traces of curiosity in Boukashov's eyes, but there was something more than mere curiosity in them now, something he felt rather than saw. Was it a scrutiny? a quest? a St. Anthony of Padua, give me back the thing I have lost? He couldn't quite define it. And so he waited.

Boukashov was facing him now, less tall than he had seemed

at first now that he was standing right in front of him, looking up at him with an appearance of dignity that was forced and therefore somewhat artificial; a man cloaked in the memories of his former importance. The attitude was a camouflage. It revealed nothing of the inner man. But then something gave way just a little in those steady blue eyes; and when Boukashov said, "Thank you, Father Vikenty," stressing the word "Father" in a tone at once casual and respectful, in a sort of do-as-the-Romans-do manner, but with something else to it that had nothing to do with manner, only with the need to say the word, he brought the cross down very gently until it touched Boukashov's forehead, and said "Peace be with you."

He then retired into a corner of the room and suffered Ivan Ivanovitch to disrobe him. The little man liked to do it in front of strangers, making a ceremony of it to impress his audience with the majesty of the church. On this occasion, "for the edification of these godless Sovietchiks," as he would undoubtedly have put it, he surpassed himself. It was a kind of mimetic ritual he indulged in, with slight genuflections and ceremonious bows that might have appeared ludicrous if they hadn't been so solemnly, so earnestly grotesque.

Ketevana and Kolia had returned from the kitchen, and Ketevana had carried the baby into an adjoining room. Kolia gave one look at Ivan Ivanovitch, and suddenly, with all the element of the unexpected in one who by ordinary seemed devoid of humor, began to imitate him, divesting the font of its white sheet in a mock ceremony of disrobing, thrusting out his lower lip and performing funny little scrapes and bows every time Ivan Ivanovitch's back was turned on him.

Father Vikenty had to bite his lips to keep a straight face. All he could do was hope that Natasha wouldn't see it, for he knew she would burst out laughing, and he would then have to give vent to his own mirth and mortally offend Ivan Ivanovitch. But Natasha was too engrossed in Boukashov to notice Kolia. She was standing near the dining alcove, her smiling face radiating interest and animation. Father Vikenty knew that expression well. It was not put on, it came to her naturally. Even as a child

her face had worn that expression when she was bent on charming, and captivating, and having her way. Ech, Natasha, Natasha, spreading her smiles like fishnets. And what happens, I wonder, if a whale gets caught in them? But the whale, to his relief, seemed intent on remaining an observer. For Boukashov was listening to her, his face solemn, his head slightly cocked to one side, his eyes studying her with that same curiosity with which they had followed the religious service. Like some archeologist, I swear to God! Examining a rare find.

Kolia, meanwhile, had lifted the sheet, disclosing the washbasin. For a moment he stood still, both hands pointing at the basin in mock bewilderment. Then his eyebrows flew up and his mouth hung loose, while his eyes dashed from Ivan Ivanovitch to Father Vikenty and back. Is that what he will find when he gets through? they seemed to ask. And suddenly Father Vikenty was swept away, out of the half empty room into a village street somewhere in the heart of Russia. He saw a mischievous peasant lad clowning for the benefit of his comrades, aping the abject fawnings of some village elder in the presence of a visiting dignitary. The vision carried memories of his own early youth. Secret chuckles rose to the surface. But Kolia's next move, as he took the basin and dashed off with it in the direction of the kitchen, brought him back to reality. "Wait," he said. "What are you going to do with that water?"

Kolia stopped. "Pour it down the sink, of course."

Father Vikenty tore himself free of Ivan Ivanovitch and took the basin from Kolia. "No," he said, his voice patient, explanatory, as though teaching a child, "this water, Kolia my dear, has been blessed to promote life, not to be wasted in death and decay." And he poured the water into the three window boxes, careful not to spill a drop, saying at the same time, "May these flowers unfold and multiply."

When he returned the empty basin to Kolia, Natasha and Boukashov were standing beside him. Natasha's face, unaccustomed to the lack of response it had met, looked a little puzzled and perplexed; while Boukashov's eyes were steady and serious, giving the lie to his smiling lips. "Well, well, well," he said some-

what condescendingly, "you are partial to the symbolic, Father Vikenty, aren't you? But I must say you express it very well. Very poetically. And I want to thank you on behalf of my flowers. I forgot to water them today."

Father Vikenty and Natasha exchanged a quick look of surprise — they had both taken it for granted that the flowers were Ketevana's — but Father Vikenty's surprise was like a box within a box, containing a further surprise. For the knowledge that Boukashov loved and tended flowers hadn't brought him any closer, hadn't made him more understandable. It didn't fit into the picture, somehow. What manner of a man is he? he wondered. Hitler, they say, also loved flowers and painted them. And Stalin, they say, pretends to love little children. But I'm probably being very unfair, God forgive me. This man has run away from it all.

Boukashov, in the meantime, impervious to Father Vikenty's mental probings, was saying, "You aroused my curiosity, most respected Father Vikenty, with those ceremonies of yours. I am thinking of that curious ritual you performed here when you told the godparents to spit on Satan. You see, I had been listening at the door before coming into the room, and I heard it." His tone was suave but with hidden bristles to it; a tone Stalin might conceivably have taken in a moment of civility, when paying Churchill a dubious compliment on the workings of the British Monarchy. "I must confess I was pleasantly surprised to find that your Church was not altogether hypocritical. All those honeyed speeches, I mean, about forgiveness and brotherly love — " An inflection of disdain emphasized the last two words, as if he were speaking of something flaccid. "Yes, I am glad to know your Church is able to be realistic at times — is able to promote violence and loathing when necessary."

For a moment Father Vikenty remained still with astonishment. Even his jaw dropped a little. "But it is right to loathe Satan — Panteley — Pantcley — ?

"Victorovitch," Boukashov prompted him. "Panteley Victorovitch. And I'm glad to hear you say that. Even though Satan is an abstraction, it establishes a sound principle. Any governing

body must perforce loathe and suppress that which tries to overthrow it, and it must teach its followers to loathe and suppress. Otherwise there'd be chaos. To pretend to the contrary is sheer hypocrisy. I always thought your church was riddled with it — with hypocrisy, I mean. And to be quite honest, I still believe it is. Isn't that so?"

Ivan Ivanovitch's growl, redolent with threats, was silenced by a wave of Boukashov's hand as completely as though it had never been uttered at all. And that gesture, which had actually expressed boredom rather than impatience or anger, impressed itself forcibly on Father Vikenty's mind. It was as smooth and well rounded as all Boukashov's movements — even when he walked he seemed to advance on velvet feet — yet it contained an imperviousness to pleas, and prayers, and curses; and it had certainly muffled Ivan Ivanovitch's outburst of indignation: He may have sent men to their death with just such a gesture as this. The thought was disturbing, as much by its possible unfairness as by its implications of ruthlessness, for there was in Boukashov, in spite of it all, a certain secret, hidden eagerness, almost childlike, that seemed to have peered through that otherwise perfunctory "Isn't that so?" as if hoping to find a rational, undeniable refutal of all he had said.

But Father Vikenty had no intention of getting entangled in a debate of this kind — for entangled he would get, that he knew — and he returned to Ivan Ivanovitch's ministrations, leaving Natasha to carry on the argument. This she did, with a new rush of energy and enticement, gradually drawing Boukashov out of his seclusion. And once again Father Vikenty felt a secret concern. He saw that their eyes did not cohere with their words, that they were using them as tentacles and feelers, and he didn't want her to get too close to this man. The image of Johnnie Stone rose up in his mind in juxtaposition to Boukashov. He remembered the respectful interest with which Johnnie had examined his church, and the dissecting, critical curiosity with which Boukashov had followed the baptismal service. He compared the glance of amused understanding and patient resolve with which Johnnie had enveloped Natasha to Boukashov's cold

objective scrutiny. As a human being Boukashov interested him more than Johnnie. Boukashov, he felt, needed support and moral help. But for companionship, marriage, love, for everything that would go to build up Natasha's happiness, Johnnie was the one. It was a strange and new experience to him, for he had always wanted her to marry a Russian. But it was stronger than he. Stick to Johnnie, was his silent warning to her. Leave this stranger alone.

8

KETEVANA, with that shy grace and ceremonious courtesy of manner that seemed to accompany everything she said and did, bowed them into the dining alcove. "Kindly be seated, dear guests." And Kolia seconded her with a loud and unceremonious, "Come and eat!"

They occupied three sides of the table, the fourth being close to the wall. Ketevana and Kolia sat together, Natasha and Boukashov opposite them. There was eagerness now in Boukashov's eyes, and the deliberateness with which he had guided her to that seat between him and the wall, as though anxious to have her all to himself, had not escaped Father Vikenty.

Natasha was smiling, slyly triumphant, showing that illusive dimple of hers which appeared only now and then, not where one would expect a dimple to be but a little higher, nearer the cheekbone, acquiring through this displacement an irresistible charm of its own. Father Vikenty let his eyes by-pass it. He was determined to remain objective during this meal, neither falling under her spell nor unduly worrying about her. He had other matters on his mind now. And he sat down beside Ivan Ivanovitch, his big smile spreading its approval and appreciation over the display of good things to eat: freshly salted cucumbers, dill pickles, herring and onions, sardines, mushrooms in sour cream, and an eggplant paste, known in the south of Russia as "Eggplant Caviar." And in the midst of it all a bottle of vodka, sweating a little after its sojourn in the refrigerator.

"A beautiful sight," he exclaimed in his richest bass. "You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble though, Ketevana, my dear.

"For such an honored guest there can be no question of trou-

ble." Hidden warmth lay under the demure formality of her half-whispered answer. It touched him. "Ech, Kolia, you lucky man," he cried. "What a gem of a little wife you've got!"

Kolia puffed himself up. "Ketevanochka was brought up by her Great-grandmother Ripsimia. And Grandmama Ripsimia was a descendant of the ancient kings of Armenia!" The overt yet challenging glance he shot at Natasha as he said this revealed the very thing he had tried to conceal: his awareness from the start of the aristocratic and historical background of the Tverskoys.

With a jaunty air Kolia picked up the bottle of vodka and uncorked it. Father Vikenty nodded his approval, glancing at the same time at Ivan Ivanovitch. His mind was full of schemes now. This meal was to bring a closer understanding between these newcomers and the old-timers; an exchange of confidences, a blending of the two elements, if possible. But he knew that in order to attain this, Ivan Ivanovitch must first be softened up. He winked at Kolia, motioning with his head in Ivan Ivanovitch's direction; and Kolia grinned in sudden comprehension, filling to the brim the little pony glass Ivan Ivanovitch had pushed forward with undisguised eagerness. For in spite of all his moralizing, Ivan Ivanovitch was really an old drunk at heart. The one thing that saved him from excess was his stinginess — it was stronger than his thirst. He never indulged unless the drinks were on the house, and this occasion of course was meat to him. Father Vikenty knew that the more Ivan Ivanovitch would imbibe the softer he would grow, like a lump of hard butter placed on a warm stove. The churlishness would gradually melt from his ungainly features, disclosing a kind of surprised nakedness, shy of its own newly winnowed face. "He is a man who should drink and drink and drink. It releases his soul," Father Vikenty had once said, shocking all his listeners, with the exception of Madame Pishnik, who liked people who drank and made merry, and Terenteeva, the actress, who as a matter of principle approved of anything eccentric and slightly vicious. But neither Madame Pishnik nor Terenteeva were there to encourage Ivan Ivanovitch, and Father Vikenty took it upon himself as soon as Kolia had filled the six pony glasses.

He proposed three toasts in succession — one for the newly baptized infant, one for its parents, and one for its sponsors — the men drinking bottoms up to every toast. Ivan Ivanovitch granted after each drink. After the third one, he leaned back in his chair and released an enormous beatific smile, to everyone's amazement; everyone, that is, except Father Vikenty. He was looking on with approval and satisfaction. Without his toasts the blending process might have been a slow one, ending perhaps in a stalemate. Now he could be reasonably sure of its success. With tongues loosened and cheeks aglow, his hosts were beginning to hold forth — even Ketevana's voice whenever she spoke lost its usual susurration, rising to a somewhat timorous resonance — while Ivan Ivanovitch was too eagerly busy over his vodka to interrupt.

Father Vikenty turned his own glass upside down. "I have drunk three toasts and that is enough. No, no, dear friends, don't ask me, don't urge me. I will drink no more." He filled his plate with mushrooms and eggplant caviar, and settled down to eat, and listen, and learn what he could learn.

"Just think where we were destined to meet again, Kolia and I," Boukashov was saying, leaning back in his chair and rolling a crumb between thumb and forefinger; while his little finger curled up in a coy and dainty way quite inappropriate to so husky a man. "I hadn't seen him since before the war in Moscow. He was then what? Fourteen or fifteen? He's my sister's son, you know."

At first, except for this brief comment, no reference was made to the past. They stuck to the present, giving bits of information about their life in New York. Kolia, as Father Vikenty already knew, was working in a match factory. Boukashov, it soon transpired, had written a few articles on his Soviet career and his sensational escape, which he had sold at a good price to a popular magazine. He had then decided to pool his resources with Kolia. Hence this apartment, and the TV set, which, Boukashov said, was indispensable to him as a source of relaxation, as a contact with the outside world — "For I seldom go anywhere, you know," he said — and as a means of learning more about the U.S.A. But when Ketevana brought in the main dish — shashliks on small

wooden skewers, and rice — the conversation veered to the past, where Father Vikenty wanted it to be.

There was no doubt about it at all, the shashliks were responsible for it; for Kolia suddenly remembered the last shashlik he had eaten in Russia, a sensational if gruesome episode. It happened during the tragic winter of Stalingrad. Coming across a dead dog in the snow, in itself a rare find in those days, he had skinned and carved the thin carcass and had roasted the slices of starved flesh over a fire. "And that is why," he concluded his story, "since then I have never liked hot dogs!"

Except for this episode, the story of Kolia's life and escape was a familiar one to Father Vikenty. He had read many similar accounts in Russian language publications: the gradual disillusionment of a young Soviet officer after he had come into contact with the West and had discovered for himself how much his leaders had lied to him; his return home on leave; the sight of disabled war veterans abjectly begging in the streets; the news, withheld from him until then, that his mother — the daughter of a factory workman and the widow of Ignaty Strelkin, a self-educated peasant, who had been one of Lenin's most ardent assistants when collectivization had first been put into effect — had died of malnutrition and lack of care as a result of a new and more drastic wave of collectivization, put into effect contrary to Stalin's wartime promises to the people; finally his return to his military duties in eastern Germany, and his escape.

There was, Father Vikenty mused, as he sat with his elbow on the table, his cheek cupped in his hand, a dreadful, repetitive, monotonous tragedy about all these accounts that one heard from Soviet escapees, a systematic, ruthless humiliation of the dignity of man. But with Ketevana's story, which after a good deal of coaxing she related in a faint voice, a sudden light shone through his temporary gloom — the light shed by Grandmama Ripsimia, that amazing octogenarian. Ketevana's father, a prominent engineer, had been liquidated during Stalin's second purge. Her mother had been arrested a year later and had never been heard of since. And when the Germans had invaded Russia, Ketevana, then still in her early teens, had been left in the northern Cau-

casus alone with her father's grandmother, old Ripsimia Obomelik. When the tide of war had turned and the German armies had begun to recede, Grandmama Ripsimia wrapped up two small bundles and said, "We will follow these strangers into their strange land, using whatever means of escape the Lord will provide us with." And all the way from the Caucasus to the German border, most of which they had been obliged to cover on foot, the old lady had kept the lead, exclaiming, "Hurry, hurry out of this paradise!"

It was Kolia who added the finishing touch to an already vivid image in Father Vikenty's mind. Grandmama Ripsimia, he said, had survived another two years in an American D.P. camp in Germany and had died shortly after he had asked Ketevana to marry him. "I was honest with her," he said. "I told her I didn't believe in God and wouldn't consent to a religious ceremony. And d'you know what her answer was?" He paused to give it its full weight, apparently convinced that it lent at least some measure of support to his views. "She said, 'What is the use of asking for the blessing of the church when most of you, young people, think of yourselves as the sole givers and creators? And now leave me in peace to prepare myself to meet the Giver of Life.' "

Father Vikenty felt the sting of tears in his eyes, so moved was he by the story of this gallant old Armenian matriarch. " 'To meet the Giver of Life.' How beautifully said," he murmured. "And how right she was, Kolia, how very right." But an agonized gulp at his side made him turn and look at Ivan Ivanovitch. Under the influence of a few more vodkas the little man had completely softened up. He seemed almost ready to weep, as he clasped his hands together. "How can you say such a thing, Father Vikenty, how can you say such a thing?" he wailed. "The blessing of the church is the blessing of the church, and there can be no approval from on High without it!" He began now to woefully shake his head, whose normal reaction was to vituperate, and threaten, and attack; and Father Vikenty slipped his arm round his shoulder to console him. "Everything is possible to God, Ivan Ivanovitch. Even a blessing outside of the church is within His possibilities." But it took a whole string of words, and a special

toast drunk by the others in his honor, for a semblance of a grin to return to Ivan Ivanovitch's gnomish countenance.

Kolia poured him another drink. "Blessings of the church?" he exclaimed with derision. "What could such blessings give me that I haven't got?" He wasn't looking at Ivan Ivanovitch as he said this, he was glancing from Father Vikenty to Natasha. "Ketevana here saved me and gave me all the happiness I needed. And security, too. If it hadn't been for her I might have gone back to the Soviets. Yes indeed, there was a time when I almost did." He caught Father Vikenty's questioning look and turned to him. "You are surprised, eh? You don't understand how such a thing could be possible? Well, you don't know what it means to be in a strange place, alone, suspected, with no one to tell you what to do. Yes, that was the worst of it — no one to tell you what to do, after you'd been told all your life! In the Soviet Union, at least, no matter what they did to me — killed me, or put me in a concentration camp to rot — I would be told, and I would understand." He suddenly turned to Natasha. "As for you — the Tverskoys and such," he cried with astonishing violence, as though in her lay the blame for all that had happened to him, "You were the ones who ran away from Russia with millions in your pockets, leaving us to face the music!"

"Millions?" cried Natasha in dismay. "Why, my parents didn't have a cent when they left!"

"Huh! That's what you say. We happen to know better. We were told all about those White Russian émigrés. They sailed through the capitalist world in their own private yachts, drinking champagne, while we others suffered."

Father Vikenty sat with a Mona Lisa smile on his face. He had started all this, had guided it by remote control, and now it was taking the turn he had wanted. Let them thrash it out, he thought, let them thrash it out. It'll be all to the good in the end. Natasha had actually burst out laughing, so absurd had Kolia's statement seemed to her; but now, seeing the outrage in his eyes, she leaned forward, her own eyes suddenly earnest. And when those eyes grew earnest, Father Vikenty thought, they could convince the devil himself.

Natasha, meanwhile, was saying, "Let me tell you the truth, Kolia. After the defeat of the White Army in 1920 my parents escaped from the Crimea to France, with their four sons — my brothers — and not a cent to their name. Before the revolution, my father, then still in his thirties, had been appointed governor of a province and was all set for a brilliant career. In Paris, at the age of forty-two, he became a taxi driver. And my mother, ten years his junior, took in sewing, did all the housework, scrubbed floors — And all their friends and relatives were in the same predicament. Some of them never got out of it. My parents were luckier. A few years before the revolution my mother had inherited a property in Poland from her grandmother. In 1926 she managed to sell it, and with the proceeds of the sale she brought her family to America. It's true, she now has a successful business — a shop on Madison Avenue where you can buy expensive men's apparel. It's quite a well-known shop called 'Princess T.' She has a comfortable apartment in town, and has recently bought a place in the country, but all that is the result of hard work. My father wasn't able to do much by then on account of a heart condition, but you should have seen how my mother worked in order to make a success of her business and put my four brothers through school and college. The oldest, Kyril, was almost seventeen when they arrived here, the youngest, Lev, seven. She worked day and night, Kolia. There were times when we didn't have much to eat. Sometimes there wouldn't be enough money to go to the movies. But I don't remember ever seeing her depressed or afraid. No, Kolia, her private yacht and champagne consisted of courage and spirit!"

"And that is God's truth," Father Vikenty exclaimed, bursting for just an instant out of his self-imposed silence to put his seal to her story.

Kolia stared at Natasha, incredulous. Ketevana's eyes were moist and full of sympathy. There was unconcealed admiration in Boukashov's eye now, as though he could see her mother's spirit reflected in her. The vision of hard-working aristocrats must have come as a revelation to them all. And they sat gazing at her in wonder and surprise.

Kolia was the first to break the silence. "But how can that be? We were told differently, weren't we?" He looked at his uncle for support, but Boukashov only shrugged his shoulders. "We were told many things, Kolia. You know that." And Kolia fell back in his chair, a dazed look on his face, as though this were the most incredible thing he had ever heard.

Another disillusionment for poor Kolia, Father Vikenty thought, as he realized that the uncovering of this useless, futile lie had come as a shock to the young man. He felt sorry for him. He is learning though. Learning fast. And so are we. But once again his musings were interrupted by Ivan Ivanovitch. It was a movement this time, not a sound, that made Father Vikenty turn and look at him. Ivan Ivanovitch, with an expression on his face that Father Vikenty could only describe as nasty, was sitting bolt upright, his fist on his hip, gloating across the table at Kolia's discomfiture. Something froze in Father Vikenty. Very deliberately he pinched Ivan Ivanovitch, so that the little man gasped. Then he said, a cat purring over a mouse, "Your glass of vodka is longing to soften you, my friend."

Well, that wasn't very nice, he said to himself, while Ivan Ivanovitch obediently drained his vodka. But then, he's such a character. Capable of anything. He'd pull the pants off Elijah the Prophet himself, if he had a chance. I swear to God! And he might have ruined it all now with his unseemly gloat — Natasha's voice brought his reflections to an abrupt end, as she said to Boukashov, "I want to know more about you. What made you escape?"

Her unexpected attack created a slight confusion at the opposite side of the table. Ketevana glanced overtly at Boukashov; Kolia seemed outraged by the impertinence of her intrusion, ready to spring to his feet at his uncle's command and put them out of the house. Boukashov himself sat up with a start, as if pricked by a pin. For an instant he stared at Natasha. But her eyes met his, smiling their challenge, and he looked down, drumming his fingers on the table. Father Vikenty pressed his big chest forward, no longer able to disguise his curiosity and interest. He sat, hunched and eager, ready to hang on every word.

When Boukashov finally began to speak, he addressed himself to Natasha, a shade of mockery in his voice. "What made me escape? Why, there were many reasons, one piling on top of the other, as you might say. Disillusionments, revelations, shock, all, of course, played their part in it. But it would take too long to tell. I think you'll have to wait and read my book to learn the whole story."

He paused. But Father Vikenty sensed that he wanted to say more. And when Boukashov began to speak again, he had a feeling it was primarily for his benefit, although the speaker kept his eyes firmly fixed on those short, agile fingers of his, which were now beating sharp staccatos on the table. "Well — on second thoughts I might perhaps say this — It might perhaps throw some light on the subject — " He cleared his throat several times. "You see, Marxism has certain dogmas which are immutable. One of them, as you may or may not know, says that capitalist states, through their ingrained contradictions, must inevitably go on creating rivalry, enmity, and war. And the belief in this dogma is deeply rooted in a good Marxist, believe me. Now! When a dogma such as this is suddenly found to be false, it upsets the entire universe of a faithful Marxist. Especially one who has been willing to commit acts of cruelty, ruthlessness, and even treachery for the promotion of his faith, as many Christian leaders did in the past." For the first time he looked straight at Father Vikenty and held his eyes. "Just such a thing did happen when the Marshall Plan was put into effect. It was shattering to many of us. You see, the Marshall Plan not only proposed, it *made* capitalist states co-operate, a thing which Marxism claimed to be impossible!" His voice sounded frayed, as though filed through from within, but his eyes remained steady, still holding Father Vikenty's. "You know what happens when dogmas begin to crumble. The whole religion goes with them. And then the killing of individual conscience, which is being done in its name, becomes an abomination." He picked up his glass and took a swallow, more for the sake of wetting his throat than for the sake of drinking. Then he looked at Natasha. "You asked me what made me escape. Well, perhaps I could answer your question this

way — if any individuals could be held responsible for a revolt such as mine, then Joseph Stalin and George Catlett Marshall did the trick." A note of mockery crept back into his voice, this time of mockery at his own expense. "And what does that leave me with? Hope, you'll say?" He glanced up at the ceiling, calculating; then looked down again. "Yes, hope. This is January 1953, isn't it? Well, I hope that a year from now the seeds which Marshall sowed will continue to grow and thrive, while Stalin will be rotting in his grave."

"But will his death make such a difference?" Natasha asked.

"I think so." His eyes were suddenly far away, full of secret dreams. "I think so," he repeated, "because millions of people all over the world believe it will."

To Father Vikenty this answer was profoundly satisfactory. It seemed to imply a belief in the power of faith. The power of collective faith, to be sure; but then this man had lost his own faith, his intransigent nature was not yet prepared to embrace another, but so long as the belief in the power of faith was there, all was not lost. He looked at Boukashov with kindly approval and encouragement.

Boukashov had been toying with his glass, gazing at it through half-closed eyes. "May I propose a toast?" he now asked, his voice suddenly bright and clear. "A toast which I think even you, my dear Father Vikenty, will be willing to honor." He raised his glass, looking at them all in turn. "I drink to Stalin's death."

Bewildered, shocked, Father Vikenty remained still with disavowal; a disavowal that spread and grew and then rose not in a column but like a swarm of bees, with words buzzing in it — "I believe in the Giver of Life, the Giver of Life, the Giver of Life." He clung to the name. It seemed to be attuned to that particular moment, expressing what to him was impossible to express in words: that death was but the punctuation of imperfection, and life alone, as demonstrated by the resurrection of Christ, was the ultimate truth to which everything in the schematic evolution of man must tend. To drink to death, even to the death of one who had set himself up to disprove the existence of God by making life itself expendable on a fabulous scale, seemed monstrous and

terrible: an embracement of putrefaction; a deliberate refraction of that same spirit of man which must eventually triumph. He looked at his glass. It was standing upside down as he had left it. He put his finger on it now. "You must excuse me. Even if I didn't have to visit a sick woman an hour from now and perhaps administer Extreme Unction, I wouldn't blacken my heart with such a toast." And in the silence that followed his words he made himself deliberately impervious to the heavy stares that tried to probe his heart and mind.

9

A FEW MINUTES later Father Vikenty stood facing Boukashov in the living room. A feeble wail of the awakened child had sent Ketevana scurrying into the adjoining room, and Natasha had gone with her. Kolia, after a few seconds of agonized fidgets during which he suffered all the maternal worries and anxieties of a devoted young father, had dashed out after them, with Ivan Ivanovitch at his heels exclaiming, "May I have another look at my goddaughter? Just one little glimpse, without disturbing her?" And Father Vikenty had been left alone with Boukashov.

Looking back at it later, he couldn't for the life of him remember how it had started — it may have been one of those spontaneous mutual recognitions — but he suddenly found himself in an argument on the comparative merits of different holds in wrestling. Boukashov, who, it transpired, had won a few amateur prizes in his youth, turned out to be as enthusiastic an addict of the sport as Father Vikenty had ever been; but while Father Vikenty felt instantly drawn to this new "brother in wrestling," as he almost called him in a momentary effusion of affection, the latter remained singularly aloof and condescending. Nobody could have said whether this attitude of Boukashov was simulated in a deliberate attempt to annoy and provoke Father Vikenty after his refusal to join in the toast, or was just an unguarded expression of superiority on the part of a younger, stronger, and more agile man. Whatever it was, it offended Father Vikenty, it irritated him, and finally angered him beyond the limits of his control. In his well-rounded tone of authority Boukashov was holding forth on the efficacy of his half nelsons, scissors, headspins, and bridges when Father Vikenty interrupted him: "I find the hammerlock very effective."

Instantly a smile, at once condescending and derisive, twisted up the corners of Boukashov's mouth. "Of course, my dear Father Vikenty. Most effective indeed, when applied by an expert wrestler." Without waiting for Father Vikenty's further comments, he started a discourse on various holds, the strangle hold in particular in which he claimed to excel, forgetting again, or perhaps deliberately omitting the hammerlock. With stubborn insistence born of irritation, Father Vikenty broke in with his original assertion: "And I tell you, the hammerlock is most effective. When I apply it to an opponent it never fails."

Boukashov drew himself to his full height. With one of those patient, you-poor-ignorant-nitwit glances with which experts sometimes confuse an argumentative amateur, he looked Father Vikenty up and down and then took refuge in sarcasm. "What are you talking about, most respected Father Vikenty? For the hammerlock never to fail — and never is a big word in anyone's mouth — one must have muscles, you know. Yes. And agility, too, not to mention real ability. And trunks of course, preferably to a clerical collar."

That Boukashov was secretly laughing at the idea of Father Vikenty, with his big stomach, appearing in a wrestling ring dressed in nothing but a pair of trunks and ready to grapple, would have been obvious to anyone. He could probably not have conceived that a priest, least of all one of Father Vikenty's age — and Father Vikenty had been boasting in the present tense — could be or could ever have been a wrestler. But Father Vikenty was no longer in a condition to perceive another man's point of view. Boukashov had hit him in his most vulnerable spot. Derogatory remarks about his muscles and his skill as a wrestler maddened him. Outrage and indignation, and an impelling urge to show the offender a thing or two would take possession of him, to a temporary eclipse of his usual discernment and sense of humor. It had been that way in his early youth, when he had striven to become a wrestler against his mother's will; it had become that way again with even greater force during the long years of loneliness and frustration. And now, suddenly retributive, he seized Boukashov by the arm and with a deft movement

twisted it behind his back. At the same time his own voice reached him, surprisingly convincing: "I still say the hammerlock is very effective."

What took place next impressed itself on his brain in a series of mad sundered flashes: a heavy thud, and Boukashov lying prostrate at his feet: a downward swoop with no other thought in mind but final victory, and his own big hands pinning Boukashov's shoulders to the floor: Boukashov's outraged eyes looking up into his: a vision of Ivan Ivanovitch and Kolia staring at him from a doorway, inarticulate horror frozen on their wide open faces: and finally a wild mêlée of cries and crashes all happening at once, with Kolia yelling "Treason" and lunging forward to Boukashov's assistance, and Ivan Ivanovitch roaring, "Don't touch the priesthood" and tripping Kolia, and Kolia coming crashing to the floor.

Shamefaced, Father Vikenty stood in the middle of the room, viewing the disaster of his own making, half of him fleeing into the vestibule after his black coat and big black hat, spurred on by the appearance of Natasha and Ketevana on the scene, the other rooted to the spot in apprehensive expectation of what was to come. Few Russians have ever been able to take personal ridicule lightly, to brush it off as a joke or as something not worth getting upset about, perhaps because their individual dignity had too often been tampered with for too long a stretch at a time; in a Russian from the Soviets, where the status of human dignity had reached its lowest ebb, this trait was even more marked. To ridicule a Soviet Russian, particularly one of Boukashov's caliber, was to court trouble — Father Vikenty's instinct told him so. Motionless, he watched Boukashov's every move as the latter rose to his feet and brushed himself off, while in the background Natasha and Ketevana stood back to back and arms outstretched between a spluttering Ivan Ivanovitch and a wrathful, rancorous Kolia.

With a quick defensive movement of his whole body, Boukashov confronted Father Vikenty and frowned on him, vacillating between complete disavowal and assault. But even as he hesitated, Father Vikenty saw a change come into Boukashov's face — the mean cunning of pride about to take refuge behind derision. A third way out, that of ridiculing and humiliating his opponent as

though in jest, had presented itself to him. Sensing this, Father Vikenty felt strangely relieved. A tentative, surreptitious smile flickered through his beard. Mock me, make fun of me, get it over with, and then let us forget, it seemed to say. And it did serve as a detonating fuse, for with a burst of laughter, too loud to be entirely natural, Boukashov clamped his fists to his sides, throwing back his head and body. "What a *pope*, what a *pope*," he cried, repeating the derogatory Russian word for priest several times over, finding in this repetition and in this public show of disrespect to Father Vikenty a vindication, a soothing balsam for his own humiliation. "What a *pope*! Comes to baptize the new generation and knocks out the old!" And Kolia, taking his cue from his uncle and leader, doubled up now with raucous laughter, began to parrot him in a still louder voice, "What a *pope*! what a *pope*! what a *pope*!"

"Not a *pope*," Ivan Ivanovitch bellowed through the din. "The Very Reverend Father Vikenty Kadilov, Rector of the Church of the Transfiguration to you!"

Boukashov, silenced in mid-laughter, turned i.. rection of the irate voice. A merry sigh of exhaustion escaped him. And Kolia's loud laughter ceased too, abruptly, to let him hear what his leader had to say.

"And I say *pope*! A resourceful, daring *pope*!" And with unexpected magnanimity — unexpected perhaps even to himself — Boukashov extended his hand to Father Vikenty. "What's more," he said, his voice velvety again but with a purr of spontaneity to it, "he has incontrovertibly shown that the hammerlock is effective!"

They stood together, hands clasped. Father Vikenty's eyes were moist with a sudden ebullience of feeling. And presently Kolia, playing follow-my-leader as usual, joined them. He patted Father Vikenty on the back. He said he was surprised, astounded, overwhelmed to find that a priest could be such a good, such a regular fellow; he said he would no longer say disrespectful things about Father Vikenty's religion. And Father Vikenty marveled a little at Kolia's lightning changes of mood — from rancor to derision, from derision to friendliness, from friendliness to something even

more complete — a preparedness to accept and respect the things he had reviled. It came as a demonstration on a small scale of the way well-trained Communists at large could switch their whole attitude, their entire point of view to suit the order of the day; and the spontaneous sincerity of it all was perhaps the most perplexing thing about it.

But Kolia, he felt, was lucky. He had hooked his wagon to Boukashov's star, and now, with no need to worry, or plan, or make decisions, he could coast behind him until he had found his own bearings. It was Boukashov who carried the real load, who needed a new destination and a new coachman. Father Vikenty wasn't thinking of himself in that role — he was far too modest for that. The coachman, he felt, need not even be a man. As usual, he was thinking of his church, the way it affected him when he entered it alone — a refuge of love and beauty, with its peaceful icons and twinkling lights and all its fingerprints of love and care. "Some day," he said, "when you have nothing else to do, come and see our church. Ah, what a pretty church! It's like a miracle. I saw it grow and blossom out of nothing. And everything in it — the icons, the chairs, the entire iconostasis — was made by the hands of poor people who loved it. I swear to it!" He blushed a little at his own sentimental enthusiasm. "And now I thank you one and all for your kind hospitality. It is time for me to go."

But Boukashov wouldn't hear of it. A celebration such as this, he said, could not end without a song; and Ketevana, he said, would sing to them. "You just wait and see," he exclaimed in a tone that promised a real treat. "The likes of it you have never heard before!" Father Vikenty glanced at Ketevana, half expecting her to blush and whisper a refusal, but he found her calm and composed, just smiling faintly and saying nothing.

"You think because she's shy," Boukashov laughed, "she'll be afraid to sing in front of strangers?"

"Oh, no!" Kolia broke in. "Ketevana is never afraid to sing. Why, I heard her sing before I ever laid eyes on her. It was at that D.P. camp in Germany. They had organized an amateur concert, and I entered the hall when she was on the stage. Only I couldn't see her at first. Isn't that so, Ketevanochka?" And with

that he ran out of the room, returning almost at once with a guitar.

Father Vikenty glanced at his watch. "Well, I still have half an hour. How about you, Natasha?"

Natasha's voice was absent — "Oh, I've got plenty of time — " But her smile was concrete, and it included Boukashov as well as Father Vikenty. And when she moved to one of the windows, Boukashov joined her, and they stood there, talking in low animated voices, and Father Vikenty couldn't hear what they were saying. Nobody bothered about Ivan Ivanovitch. He had retired to the dining alcove, where he sat at the table, reliving the tensions of the last hour and mingling silent sobs with vodka.

Ketevana struck a few chords on the guitar and began to sing. For a moment or two Father Vikenty, still free and uncaptivated, watched the others — Kolia squatting on the floor in rapt attention, Boukashov leaning against the side of the window with closed eyes, Natasha beside him, a smile of polite skepticism already voided of its substance but still clinging to her startled, yielding face — and then he himself got caught up and carried away. Natasha, Kolia, Boukashov vanished as completely out of his sight as if they had never been there at all. Only Ketevana remained, and Ketevana's voice. She seemed to be living in it, high and clear and pure, while into her pretty face crept an expression of beauty, a translucent quality, delicate and hard to define. She was singing an old Armenian song — "One of Grandmama Ripsimia's," she had said — a haunting, repetitive tune, at once plaintive and illusive. He could discern a lament in it, and a call, a longing and a relinquishment. It wound and unwound itself around his heart, then ceased, unfinished, between two heartbeats. Three times this repeated itself. Then the song came to an end, dying in mid-air. No one applauded. They were too hushed, transported too far away for applause. Natasha whispered, "More." But Ketevana shook her head and handed the guitar to Kolia.

"What? No more?" Father Vikenty exclaimed with a kind of nostalgic regret.

She shook her head again. "There can be no more. This song expressed an everlasting gratitude for what has been." And

blushing now, as though ashamed of expressing herself in speech where she could soar in song, Ketevana was about to retreat into the next room, when Father Vikenty sprang to his feet, his cheeks flushed, his arms outspread. It had come upon him suddenly — the meaning behind her words. She had selected that particular song as an expression of her gratitude, as a special gift for him. And elated he cried: "It is a sin, a sin to hide such talent. She should be seen, she should be heard! Isn't that so, Natasha? Ech, Ketevana, my dear, if you would only consent to appear on the program of our Concert-Ball, you'd be a sensation. I swear to it!" In a few words he told them about the forthcoming event, adding as an extra inducement, "And after the concert there will be dancing."

Ketevana's eyes sparkled. She even caught her breath. This shy little person, he thought, would find a way to get what she wanted. He would have been certain of her acceptance, even if Boukashov hadn't set his mark of approval on it; thereby effacing Kolia's frowns of doubt: "Why not, Kolia? Why not? You ought to take Ketevana out and give her a good time. You know how she loves to dance."

It was Ivan Ivanovitch who almost spoiled it all. Offended now at having been forgotten and overlooked, he stationed himself under the arch of the alcove, adjusting his jacket and thrusting out his lower lip. "You can't make such arrangements without first asking Madame Pishnik. She is the organizer of the concert program."

Luckily a loud hiccup punctuated the end of his sentence. A ripple of subdued laughter raced across the room: "When I tell Madame Pishnik about our Ketevana, she'll be thrilled!" Father Vikenty cried. "Give me your phone number, Kolia. She will call you up and make all the arrangements. But mind now," he chided him in fun, "be cordial and friendly when she calls. Madame Pishnik has a heart as sensitive as it is big."

10

GOING DOWN in the elevator, to which Kolia had ceremoniously conducted them — Father Vikenty's new vassal until such time as Boukashov chose to give the word for insurrection, was Natasha's mental comment — Natasha put her hand on Father Vikenty's arm and gave it an affectionate squeeze. "Darling Batiushka! You performed a small miracle. Honestly you did!"

Father Vikenty blushed a deep red. "What are you saying, Natasha? Have you no fear of God? Never mention miracles and me in the same breath!"

"But you did, you did," she insisted slyly, for the benefit of Ivan Ivanovitch, who in a corner of the elevator was already puffing himself up to retort and protest. "The way you wound them all around your little finger."

Father Vikenty's reply, accompanied by a sigh, showed that he too had a clear insight into the situation. "Ech, Natasha, my dear, not by the will of God, I fear. By Boukashov's will."

"But that's just it, Batiushka. That's what I call a small miracle — the kidnaping and subduing of Boukashov's will."

Father Vikenty blushed again. He couldn't help feeling shocked by the word miracle as applied to himself. But he made no further comment. It was wiser, he felt, to let it slip by and be forgotten. And Natasha said no more, preferring to wait until she was alone with him; for upon leaving the apartment she had announced that she would first drop Ivan Ivanovitch at the church and then take Father Vikenty to his next destination in the upper Nineties of Madison Avenue.

Ivan Ivanovitch, the effects of the vodka accelerated in the cold fresh air, trailed behind them to the car, carrying the suitcase. With a groan and a sigh he settled down in the back seat, mourn-

ful and miserable, his face reflecting a multitude of alcoholic fumes and smothered burps. Only once did he break the silence, when he said, with a sudden return to arrogance and assumption, "Tomorrow, Father Vikenty, I will go with you to Prince Tverskoy's place in the country. You will need my assistance in conducting the ceremony of the blessing of the house." But Natasha's curt "That won't be necessary" silenced and deflated him. It was the way she said it, rather than the words, that did it: a tone, a manner so frigidly formal it could chill the thickest hide. Father Vikenty marveled at this sudden freeze in one ordinarily so outgoing and friendly, as he always did when such changes came upon Natasha. He could still remember how astonished he had been when, still in her early teens, she had withered a man twice her age with one look and a few words — "That will be enough!" He was trying to be fresh, she had explained later. Generations of Tverskoy pride, he now thought, snubbing meddlesome upstarts.

He felt sorry for the little upstart behind him, knowing how much Ivan Ivanovitch would have liked to go to the Tverskoys', to be part of the gathering there, to boast about it later to Mr. Owtch or some other friend. It would be so easy for me to arrange it and give him that little pleasure, but I just won't. And feeling a little mean about it all, he tried to forget it. In the silence that followed Natasha's cutting remark, he concentrated his attention on the red seats and the red and chromium-plated trimmings of the big white Cadillac. Such a flashy, feminine car, he said to himself. Johnnie must have bought it with Natasha in mind. Yes, that must be it. And again, as after the christening, Johnnie Stone rose up in his mind in juxtaposition to Boukashov, and again he scored in his estimation.

This set Father Vikenty's thoughts rolling. It seemed to him somehow that Johnnie was the man for her. There was something solid and peaceful about Johnnie, and Johnnie understood her. Yes, and he loved her, too. Of course there were a few others hovering in the background — Yuri Bourkevitch, the Professor's son, for instance. A nice lad, plain, unpretentious, good. But Father Vikenty still felt like laying his bet on Johnnie. And if it wasn't to be Johnnie, then anyone — anyone rather than Bou-

kashov: he was too old, too broken up and yet too much of one piece, too unscrupulous and too vulnerable at the same time. And above all he was a stranger; even though he was a Russian, he was a stranger. And he could be cruel and ruthless — that much he had admitted himself.

Father Vikenty was arguing the point as though it were inevitable for Natasha to fall for Boukashov. But then, he knew there had been an impact, perhaps not on her heart as yet but on her mind. And there was besides that impulsiveness, that recklessness of hers; and she, too, was vulnerable in her own way. Doubtless she was thinking of the man right now, this very minute. She would probably talk about him at the very first opportunity — And indeed, with Ivan Ivanovitch disposed of at the church and the two of them headed alone for Madison Avenue, Natasha began to talk.

"A strange man that Boukashov, isn't he? Handsome in his own way. I must say he intrigues me. He seems so smooth, so well rounded, but he is not. You know what I mean? Do you ever think of people that way, Batiushka — as just shapes, and colors, and sounds? I do. Always. Take yourself for instance. Some people think you are all white and fluffy. My cousin Sandra Plodovitinoff does. But I told her she was wrong. To me you are a spiral that winds up and up, smelling of good leather, and purring a little, not like a cat, like a well-greased engine. And Miss Katastrofoff is a lot of drops. I don't quite know how to explain it — a bunch of drops put together. And Madame Pishnik is a purple explosion. And Ivan Ivanovitch — well, he is something else again I won't even mention." She laughed a little at her own veiled coarseness. "All of you are what you seem to be. But Boukashov, you see, should have been pink and is a vivid green. And he looks like a circle and is all angles instead. Perhaps he is a set of sharp angles pointing at a lost periphery. I don't know."

"And Johnnie?" Father Vikenty asked.

She glanced at him out of the tail end of her uptilted eye, then stared at the traffic light ahead. "Oh, Johnnie is a full stop. Like that light there. And I'm not ready for that. Not yet." The car

began to move again. "Johnnie is so well punctuated, all one has to do is settle back and read him. But Boukashov has to be deciphered all the time, and that's what intrigues me. You know, he said he would come to the concert with Kolia and Ketevana. And he said he wanted to see me some time alone and have a long talk with me. So I invited him to have a drink with me next week, and I'll see to it that no one else is there at the time."

He searched her face, but there was no trace of a blush on it; and her apparent shamelessness came to him as a shock. "And Johnnie?" he asked again, stubborn now and accusing.

"Oh, Johnnie," she cried in a kind of secret desperation. "Forget about Johnnie. For a while at least, until I've found myself. Perhaps I will always be doing him wrong. Perhaps I had better forget him right now. Perhaps I will never be able to forget him. I don't know. As I told you yesterday, it is all very complicated with Johnnie."

He guessed there was something about Johnnie she was not yet ready to discuss, and he let it go by. "How about Yuri then?" he asked.

She laughed at this. "Yuri Bourkevitch? You know what he is? A question mark! Not that he is a puzzle in himself, he goes about puzzling over me. But our relationship is very platonic, I can assure you. We discuss the world, and mankind, and life, and the meaning of love. Oh yes, very platonic. Besides," she added somewhat inconsequentially, "Sandra is in love with him and I am keeping him for her."

It was Father Vikenty's turn to laugh, softly, into his beard. "Oh, Natasha! You'll be the death of me yet. What kind of cold storage is that? And how can you keep him for her when he is in love with you?"

She had come to another stop and was looking intently at the light ahead. "Well, perhaps he is. But I could never be in love with him. He'd drive me mad with his everlasting probings. Now Boukashov is different. He may look upon me as — "

"He looks upon you as a museum piece."

She glanced at him again out of the corner of her eye, surprised this time and amused. "Yes, I suppose he does. And I sup-

pose I look upon him as something out of a zoo. Something not quite human as yet from my point of view, but with endless possibilities of becoming so. I just can't let it go by. I must find out. I must find out what he is and where he is going — Oh, Batiushka dear, I love talking to you. I have no one else I can talk to like this. It's almost like talking to myself, except that I always learn something. Yes, I do. And what I wanted to say just now was that Boukashov may look upon me as a being from another planet, but I think he is willing to accept me for what I am, without wanting to change me."

"And Johnnie?"

"Well? What about Johnnie?" She was on the defensive now, annoyed and apprehensive.

"Doesn't he accept you for what you are, without wanting to change you? And what do you do? You use his car, and you use him for your own ends quite shamelessly. Now don't you?"

This time she did blush. "Oh, Batiushka! Now you sound like Aunt Ella, Sandra's mother — moral and precise. Stop it. It's not like you. Lacking all imagination, as my Aunt Ella does, it's so easy to be good and never deviate!"

They remained silent for a while. But when they had reached their destination, and she had double-parked the car to let him out, she turned to him, her eyes grave. "Darling Batiushka, don't think badly of me, whatever happens. I'm not really bad, you know."

"Ech, Natasha! A magpie — a magpie, that's what you are. I swear to God! Getting dazzled by a bright object and then chattering and chattering about it."

It was said with a kind, good-natured smile, but the rebuke in it came through, nevertheless, clear and sharp. She loved him all the more for expressing it that way. "You are so right," she cried, laughing a little. "And you are the dearest of dear old uncles to me, with all the understanding my father never had. And I promise you I will mend my ways. Just give me a little time. The magpie will disappear. Perhaps I'll even become the dove you want me to be. But always remember, with a sharp beak to peck its way out of insignificance!" He had opened the door and was

backing out of the car, holding on to the huge rim of his black hat, when she suddenly leaned forward and caught him by the shoulder. "Wait! I know it isn't proper for a priest to be hugged and kissed by a young woman in the middle of a street, but I'm going to do it all the same." She slipped her arm around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. Then she was back in her proper place behind the wheel, laughing a little again at her own effusiveness. "There, Batiushka darling! Now you are thoroughly compromised. See you tomorrow at three. Johnnie and I will meet you at the station." And there was both appeasement and gentle mockery in the way she emphasized Johnnie's name.

11

THE SMALL railroad station in the backwoods of Connecticut looked desolate and forlorn on a Sunday afternoon with no commuters' cars to nose its wooden platform, like so many faithful, watchful dogs. The day was clear but windy, full of violent, chilling gusts; yet Father Vikenty did not seek the shelter of the station building. He stood outside, clutching his huge black hat with both hands, the suitcase containing his vestments forgotten at his feet. His cheeks were burning, his eyes swimming in tears brought on by the cold, but in his big heaving chest there was nothing but relief now, as the last simmers of rage left him, disseminated and dispersed by the wind. Once in a while situations had arisen in his life when his whole being had been outraged, and a blind, ungovernable fury had seized upon him; and that was precisely what had happened to him ten minutes before in Mr. Owtch's car.

For, contrary to his original plans and Natasha's suggestions, he had not taken the train. He had accepted instead Mr. Owtch's unexpected offer of a lift. Father Vikenty was a poor man, always short of cash. He was obliged to take advantage of such favors in order to get around and visit his parishioners. Yet money as such meant little to him. To compare him to the proverbial church mouse was indeed a temptation; and like that mouse, presumably, he wasn't aware of his poverty. The church paid his rent; it paid the woman who came to clean his apartment; it gave him twenty-five dollars a week on which to take care of himself and Dragoon, and he considered himself amply provided for and fully rewarded. Any extras received for private offices — the office of baptism, of marriage, of the dead — he brought back to the church. God's tips for God's errands, he would say to himself, handing over the

money to Miss Katastrofoff, the church treasurer; and that morning he had given her the twenty dollars Kolia had slipped into his pocket the day before. But he was sorry now that he hadn't borrowed from her the amount needed for the railway fare. He might have spared himself the shock of that ungovernable rage.

The offer of a lift had actually come from Ivan Ivanovitch. "Meester Owtch and I are driving out to the Russian Monastery to buy some black bread. A stop at the Tverskoys' wouldn't take us more than ten miles out of our way," he had said. And the irony of it had not escaped Father Vikenty. It was as evident as though it had been written all over Ivan Ivanovitch's lumpy nose that the purchase of black bread, for which the monastery was famous, would be followed by a report to Archbishop Sofrony, who was in residence there. Well, the joke was on him, and he had been willing to accept it as such. But he had no intention of letting it turn into a distasteful joke at the expense of his friends. He knew that Ivan Ivanovitch and Mr. Owtch, and quite a few others among his parishioners, were unduly curious about this newly acquired property of the Tverskoys. He hadn't liked the way Ivan Ivanovitch had stressed the word "stop," nor the way his eyes had grown secret of a sudden, with a shadow of a question mark lurking within — a sure sign of some undesirable scheming. And he had remembered Natasha's curt, "That won't be necessary." "No need for any stop," he had said. "Just throw me out at the railway station. That'll be even less out of your way."

Otherwise, he thought, under the pretext of helping him but actually out of sheer cussedness and a desire to assert himself in the face of Natasha's withering interdiction, Ivan Ivanovitch would certainly make more than a perfunctory stop at the Tverskoys'; and Mr. Owtch would then have to be invited in, too. He could almost see Ivan Ivanovitch offering his explanations and apologies to the old Prince, with absurd erratic surges of the torso and a foolish upswing of the chin which he considered in keeping with refined deportment in high society. And he had flung a silent No at the vision. There are limits to everything. And I've had enough of Ivan Ivanovitch. Basta!

It was this "Basta," this sudden flirt in him, that had been the

cause of his trouble. At first it had sustained him against the little man's petulance and Mr. Owtch's importunities, but when mud had been flung to soil Princess Tverskoy's good name and bastardize Natasha, it had come surging forth, raging, blind, striking out in all its fury at Mr. Owtch. And Father Vikenty's face grew redder and redder as he stood there, thinking with rising shame now of what he had done.

His first rational thought was of the effect that this wild outburst of his might have on the reputation of those whose honor he had tried to protect. Mr. Owtch and Ivan Ivanovitch knew of his devotion to Princess Tverskoy and Natasha; they were well aware, too, that ever since the Tverskoys had come to New York he had acted as their Father Confessor and would, therefore, be bound to know a thing or two about their private life. His sudden rage would probably be misinterpreted; taken as a proof that there was some truth in that gossip, which for years had hovered around the tip of many a Russian tongue in New York. He realized it all too clearly now, and his indignant eyes looked inward, full of bitter reproaches. But his second thought was of the act of violence itself; and that to his cooled-off brain appeared inexcusable, unforgivable, deadly, rendering him speechless. "Och-och," he groaned in impotent horror and remorse; and again, "Och-och!"

Ivan Ivanovitch had been particularly insufferable during the trip, picking on Father Vikenty in his most provoking way; and Mr. Owtch, apparently determined to inflict himself on the Tverskoys — with an eye to business, Father Vikenty knew that, though he didn't know that he had already promised Ivan Ivanovitch a commission on any orders he might obtain through the Princess — would exclaim every quarter of an hour or so, "What's the big idea of waiting at the station, Batiushka? We'll drive you in style right up to those princely mansions." And every time, the flint rapidly turning to steel, Father Vikenty would retort with unusual curtness, "No! Natasha said she'd meet me at the station, and at the station I'll wait for her."

Sudden resistance and abruptness in one ordinarily amenable and mild often engenders strong resentments. And half a mile before they had reached the station, Mr. Owtch and Ivan Ivano-

vitch, thoroughly aroused now by his stubborn refusals but hiding their grievance under a poor pretense at banter, let loose a cross fire of gibes at the expense of the Tverskoys, bandying them to and fro across Father Vikenty, who sat between them:

"What would you say, Ivan Ivanovitch? Do princes in the privacy of their homes scratch their buttocks and armpits and make themselves generally comfortable as other men do, or are they always *zierlich-manierlich*? . . . A little of this and a little of that, Meester Owtch. . . . A minuet with a belch, Ivan Ivanovitch? Ha-ha! . . . Yes, Meester Owtch. But don't forget the, pardon my gases, Princess-my wife! . . . Ech, Ivan Ivanovitch, there's no gainsaying it, life must be a constant cotillion to those who know how to milk a millionaire!"

This last gibe, with all its hidden insinuations, was like an electric shock to Father Vikenty, who until then had felt both embarrassed and saddened by such talk. He stiffened, the remnants of those bicepses stirring in his arms, as the first spurt of rage shot through him. He even closed his eyes to fight it down. But now it was Mr. Owtch alone who was speaking, suddenly malevolent, ugly, his vanity stung to the quick by a newly born suspicion that perhaps the Tverskoys had expressly forbidden Father Vikenty to bring him — Conrad Owtch — to their home. "And what's all this about princes anyway? In America I'm just as good as they are. And as Americans they have no right to a title."

"Prince Tverskoy never became naturalized," Father Vikenty said as patiently as he could, still trying to master his anger.

"Ah-ah! Taking advantage of this country and secretly sticking up his nose at it?"

"And Princess Tverskoy," Father Vikenty went on, ignoring this remark, "has her title incorporated into her business. Otherwise I've always heard her refer to herself as Evdokia Tverskoy in Russian, and Mrs. Tverskoy in English."

"Putting on the dog," exclaimed Mr. Owtch, inconsequentially.

Father Vikenty spoke in a strained monotone now, staring ahead at the windshield, knowing that it would be better, wiser, more dignified if he kept his mouth shut, but unable to do so.

"And Natasha calls herself Miss Tverskoy, everywhere and always."

"Huh," Mr. Owtch scoffed, taking full revenge on an imaginary snub, "Miss Tverskoy indeed! Everyone knows Joe Donovan fertilized the egg. The Prince only hatched it."

It was then that it happened. Something snapped. With a drumming in his ears and a thump in his brain, his left eye straining, drawn to its outer corner like a tighly strung bow, he seized Mr. Owtch by the collar of his coat and shook him. They had just slowed down, entering the station yard, and the car swerved to one side and stopped. The engine died with a jerk of resentment at the gears, and the jerk translated itself into another shake of Father Vikenty's arms, so that Mr. Owtch's hat fell off and the few hairs on his bald head stood up on end. But Father Vikenty saw nothing, felt nothing, not even Ivan Ivanovitch's frantic clawings at his back. Through clenched teeth he hissed, "Silence, scum! I'll grind you into powder, you devil's sperm!"

Then he let go. He had no recollection of the next two minutes — of Mr. Owtch and Ivan Ivanovitch, frightened and obsequious, ushering him with nervous bows to the station building, carrying his suitcase, imploring him to be calm; and then dashing back to the car and leaving him there, with his big chest heaving. "Och-och," he groaned for a third time. "Scum — ! Devil's sperm — ! Och, what words! And coming from a priest — Och-och!"

He fell back to thinking of Mr. Owtch's truculent insinuations and all the gossip that lay behind them. Silence, he said to himself, ridicule, a touch of sarcasm even, anything would have been better than what he had done. For after all, there was a good deal of truth to that gossip. There had been a millionaire by the name of Joseph T. Donovan, and he had fallen head over heels in love with Evdokia Tverskoy, then in the prime of her physical glory — romantically beautiful, gallant and brave; and she had fallen in love with him, the rugged, sentimental, handsome Californian; and the Prince had suffered tortures of jealousy; and in the fullness of her loyalty and spirit she had folded upon herself, and had turned back to the man who had seemed like an oak of strength and vision when she had first loved and married him but

was now an uprooted, sagging tree. And then, only then had Natasha been born; and the Prince, in his triumph, had insisted on asking Joe Donovan to be the child's godfather, which had given rise to a new wave of gossip; and Donovan had remained a faithful friend of the family, prolonging his visits to the East for weeks at a time, backing the Princess's business when it had almost failed; and after his death in '46, they found that he had bought the estate on Long Island, where twenty years before he had first met Evdokia, and had left it to her in his will; and now she had sold it to buy this place in Connecticut. Yes, he thought, that was the story, and there was much in it to set idle tongues awagging so long as tongues continued to wag over other people's private affairs; and fisticuffs could never prove that they had jumped to wrong conclusions.

He thought again of his mad assault on Mr. Owtch, only this time his sense of the ridiculous came to his rescue, surging up all of a sudden. He saw it all as a bystander might have seen it: three men in a small car — a little man, a bald man, and a huge, outraged priest — and the priest shaking the bald man, and the little man clawing at the priest, and all three rolling out of the car in a wild, panting, hissing mêlée. A silent laughter seized upon him, shaking his whole frame, from his shoulders to his big stomach. He was laughing, and crying a little, too, at his own unfitness, at his own folly: Vikenty Kadilov, you big blunderbuss! No matter how often you dress up a bear in a priest's cassock, it won't bring the bear grace! And he was still laughing, the tears streaming down his cheeks now, as Johnnie Stone's big white Cadillac turned into the station yard.

Natasha was leaning out of the window, amused and a little bewildered. "Batiushka! You mad thing! What are you doing standing out there in the cold? Trying to catch your death?"

"Nothing, nothing, Natasha, my dear," he said, gasping a little and wiping his tears away. "Just airing my sinful dome."

"But how did you get here? Dropped from heaven? The train isn't due in for another ten minutes."

"Not from heaven! No, no, no, Natasha, not from heaven."

A dog barked in the car. He saw Natasha's Boston terrier look-

ing eagerly at him through the window. "Poontic," he cried, russifying, as usual, the dog's name, which was Punty. And the sight of the little dog's joy of recognition helped to pin his thoughts on his present duties, both those demanded by others and those he had imposed on himself — the blessing of the house, the tickets for the Concert-Ball, and a closer study of Johnnie Stone. What was it Natasha had said about it all being so complicated with Johnny? But why should I pry into her affairs? When the time is ripe, she'll tell me. All I want to know now is whether my first impression of Johnnie was right.

Johnnie came running out of the car to help him with the suitcase, and again he thought how pleasantly serious his good-looking face was, and noticed those big brown eyes, a little too soft perhaps, but not weak, and not too yielding. "Tankyou, Johnnie," he said in his bad English, handing him the suitcase. "Careful, please. This contains my beeg business."

Johnnie threw his head back and laughed. And Father Vikenty laughed too, thinking at the same time, Only a man with a clear conscience could laugh like that. He then climbed into the back seat, and Punty, who until then had been standing on his hind legs beside Natasha, trembling with excitement in every limb, shot forward, a black and white streak of noisy eagerness, hitting the spot he had been aiming at — Father Vikenty's nose, which he licked and nibbled at at the same time before its owner could draw him away. "Poontic! Such a little devil! Such a little rascal! Such a little imp!" Father Vikenty kept exclaiming, holding the wriggling, panting little dog at arm's length; and, "Dragoonushka sends you his regards," he added, as Natasha grabbed Punty, pulling him over into the front seat, where she shushed him and tapped his flat nose with her finger to calm him down.

It was then that Father Vikenty noticed for the first time that Natasha's cousin, Sandra, was sitting in the back seat beside him, looking at him with that tranquil smile of hers, almost enigmatic in its absolute acquiescence. The handsome and silent one, he called her. He didn't know her well; the Plodovitinoffs had come to New York fairly recently from Paris, and he hadn't seen much of her. Natasha claimed her as her favorite cousin — by virtue of

contrast, perhaps, he thought; and Sandra was working in the Princess's shop, and the Princess had told him she had shown so much ability and such practical sense that she was now training her to take over the entire business, since Natasha showed no interest in it. That much he knew. And the only thing he could think of, as he shook hands with her, was of that strange "cold storage," as he called it, in which Natasha was keeping Yuri Bourkevitch supposedly for her sake. He wondered for an instant whether Yuri had been invited that day to the Tverskoys', and answered his own question with a categorical denial. Natasha may be keeping him for her, but she won't mix him with Johnnie. One at a time, whether in transit or for keeps. He gave Sandra one of those quick, all discerning looks, acquired through years of dealings with men and women of all kinds. In quiet pools, he mused, in quiet pools — For there was, he thought, something deceptive about this quiet girl, outwardly so unruffled, undisturbed; almost placid. Something very determined underneath it all, like a well-hidden trap: Once a fellow steps into it, it'll be — Wham! She'll never let go.

"But, Batiushka, don't be so mysterious. How did you get here?" Natasha was asking, always anxious to get every detail of a given situation.

"By car, Natasha. With Ivan Ivanovitch and Mr. Owtch."

His tone was so flat, so lacking in its usual ringing overtones, that Natasha let the matter drop. She contented herself with saying, "I'm glad you didn't bring your shadow with you."

They were on their way now, with Johnnie at the wheel; and they were speaking English for his benefit.

"How far to house?" Father Vikenty asked.

"About three miles," said Johnnie.

"And house very full? Much Tverskoys, eh?"

Johnnie laughed. "You can say that again, Father. The Tverskoys, and the Plodovitinoffs, and the Shoustrovos, and the Nashchokins, and the Boussourlins." He seemed to take special pride in his mastery of these difficult names, rolling them off on the tip of his tongue. Father Vikenty liked this.

"You pronounce Russian names very well," he said. "Very."

"Oh, I've had plenty of practice. Nashchokin was the toughest to crack" — that was Princess Tverskoy's maiden name. "And do you know how I did it? First I thought of Nash — the automobile, you know. Then of chucking — chucking away. Nash-chucking, Nash-chucking, Nash-chucking. It was easy going from there on. Just had to adjust the accent a bit — Nashchokin."

He laughed. And Natasha laughed. And even Sandra laughed — a kind of gulped-up laugh. But Father Vikenty's laugh was perfunctory, for he was not quite sure he approved of the inclusion of an automobile into the name. "You know, Johnnie," he said, instructively, "Nashchokin very old name, very historical. Very indeed."

"Oh, I know that. But we poor ignorant Americans have to have something to catch on to."

They all laughed again, but not much else was said for a while. Father Vinkenty settled back more comfortably in his seat. All he could see of Johnnie was the back of his head and the lobes of his ears, sharply edged, with slight dents to them, as if they had been stuck to the head with Scotch tape. The nape, still young and innocent, seemed purposeful to him, even a bit stubborn. But he could find little else in it, and his sidelong glance wandered once or twice to the silent girl at his side. She reminded him of the Princess in her younger days, but in a strange, uncomfortable way. He recognized the black hair and blue eyes, and that delicate oval of the face, but the vitality and warmth were missing. If God had blessed her with her aunt's spirit, he thought, to shine through those handsome features of hers, she would be beautiful. He fell to thinking again of that time, twenty-six years ago, when Evdokia Tverskoy had been torn between her love for Joe Donovan and her loyalty to her husband, remembering how she had said to him, "Eighteen years of marriage cannot be thrown out of the window, Batiushka. There used to be a completeness about Andrey, a fullness of purpose, until the revolution broke him. He gave me much in those days. He needs me now." It had been said simply, with no drama to it. And he had always marveled at the way in which she had turned from her lover to her husband, with a relinquishment as complete as it was unassuming; a ca-

pacity that must have been a gift, coeval with birth. And would this girl be like her aunt, he wondered, when her turn came to be tested — for somehow he had no doubts that she, too, would stick to her husband — or would she make him smart under her sacrifice? For therein lay the difference between sweet and bitter fruit.

It was Natasha who brought him out of his reverie. "There's the house, Batiushka. Look!"

He leaned forward to see better. It stood on a hillside about a quarter of a mile away — two-storied, painted white, surrounded by tall trees with the bareness of winter now upon them — one of those old New England houses, pure and simple in line, and with an air of repose that yet bespoke a rugged past.

"Isn't it lovely, Batiushka?"

"A Nest of Noblemen! I swear to God!" he cried in Russian, quoting the title of Turgenev's novel.

Quickly Natasha translated this to Johnnie, and they burst out laughing at the thought of a nest of Russian noblemen in the heart of Connecticut.

12

AND YET Father Vikenty had been right, and Johnnie bore witness to it in a spontaneous little speech; full of spurts of enthusiasm, unexpected in one ordinarily given to silent observation; while the house vanished round a bend in the road, remaining hidden behind a hill for a time, then reappearing suddenly when least expected, full grown, hospitably proffering its front porch.

This old New England homestead — to which the Princess had brought all the things she had amassed throughout the years, intending to make it her home — had indeed been transformed into a nest of noblemen, Johnnie said. A nest of indubitably Russian noblemen, although that long front room, with its paneled walls and its few pieces of early American furniture, could be deceptive; especially on an afternoon such as this, when the younger generation had foregathered in it, and American clothes, American haircuts and hairdos, American college jargon, and a bottle of whiskey and a cocktail shaker on a corner table stood out to confront and confuse the visitor. Yet even there one could discern gestures, mannerisms, intonations, that were different; for each one of these young men and women, taken separately, could have passed for an American anywhere, yet collectively there emanated a foreignness from them all their own, an undefinable yet unmistakably Russian quality, of a kind no longer produced by Russia itself, and on which all else seemed superimposed.

"This reversion to type has always fascinated me," he said, "and it can be confusing to a newcomer. But let him step into the back room — the 'little drawing room,' as they call it — and there'll be no doubt left in his mind as to the true nature and character of the place." For here the furniture, of a heavy Russian "Empire" style, stands grouped together in quite a special way of its own,

with an eye for intimacy and conversational facilities; and the walls are hung with pictures of every kind, from a cluster of old miniatures to photographs of the ancestral estate of the Tverskoys near Moscow and water-color sketches of Russian scenes,— little domed churches and merry troikas — cozy, sentimental, refreshing, but of no particular artistic merit; and in contrast to them, the tables are laden with objets d'art created by the famous jeweler Fabergé — small enamel frames of the most delicate shades, silver ash trays shaped like old Russian drinking vessels, jade ash trays with rubies and diamonds around the edge, small animals carved out of semi-precious stones — and none of them brought out of Russia by the Tverskoys at the time of their escape, as the uninitiated might have concluded, but salvaged from the Bolsheviks by American dealers, and found in Fifth Avenue stores, where they had been bought, piece by piece, as Christmas and birthday gifts (mostly by Joe Donovan, though Johnnie of course didn't know this). And the eight older people sitting there, vigorously alive and argumentative, could yet pass for revenants, so completely do they seem to belong to the objects in the room — those objects that have miraculously returned from a vanished world to range themselves and recompose here a colorful, indigenous background of an old-time St. Petersburg or Moscow drawing room.

Natasha laughed. "Johnnie is always pointing out things I never noticed before and never thought of."

Sandra said, frowning suspiciously, "Perhaps he is making fun of us."

And, "No," cried Father Vikenty. "Johnnie, he likes you, understands you. You take best from America, he knows that! And you give best. Take, give, take, give — result fine! Everybody strokes your head for it." And his hearty laugh rather than this somewhat obscure statement, hopelessly entangled in his bad English, settled the matter to everyone's satisfaction.

Young voices, young laughter, the sound of a piano, the shrill bark of a dog resounded through the long front room as Father Vikenty entered the adjacent front hall with its narrow flight of stairs vanishing at a right angle into the upper regions of the

house. Suleiman the Magnificent, commonly known as Schnitzel — Princess Tverskoy's dachshund — came prancing out of the room, barking at the top of his lungs, his tail an angry upright blade; but when Punty rushed at him, bumping into him with his nose and almost knocking him off his short legs, he turned and walked grandly away, not reptilian in appearance but definitely mesozoic; "Half a sausage, half a swan," said Natasha. And in the silence that had followed the slamming of the front door — for the wind outside was working itself up into a regular gale — one solitary tired bark, monotonous and soporific, kept repeating itself at regular intervals in the back room as though to remind everyone that the voice of the older generation could not be stilled; and Father Vikenty knew that it came out of the aging, asthmatic depths of Bubulenka, a fat pug belonging to "Aunt Dasha" — old Countess Boussourlin, Prince Tverskoy's sister.

On that particular afternoon the gathering of the clan was not so numerous as some which Father Vikenty had witnessed in the Tverskoy apartment in New York, for the four Tverskoy sons and their families were now absent. The eldest, Kyril, lived in California, the second, Nikita, in Chicago, the third, Andrey, had been sent by his firm to South America for two years, and Lev, the youngest, the one who had married his own first cousin, Sandra's oldest sister, was on government service in Germany. But then all of them had married relations. As Natasha had once laughingly said, "My family have Pharaonic propensities, though what god they are trying to propagate within themselves I really don't know, unless it be a god of mutual admiration." And everyone, indeed, in this house could claim some degree of consanguinity, the Nashchokin side of the family — Princess Tverskoy herself, her brother Vladimir, and her sister Ella Plodovitinoff — being second cousins once removed of Prince Tverskoy and his sister. Father Vikenty had known most of them for years, but he had never been able to keep track of their complicated interrelationships, and he always dreaded a little meeting old Countess Boussourlin — Aunt Dasha — who seemed to expect of him a clear and precise knowledge of this intricate family tree, especially of her own illustrious branch.

Knowing this, Natasha slid up to his side before entering the long room, and whispered, "Just a reminder, Batiushka. The three blond girls are my Shoustrovo cousins, the daughters of Aunt Dasha's daughter. And the four dark boys are the Boussourlins, the sons of Aunt Dasha's son. The dark girl at the piano is Ea, Sandra's sister, who is married to the eldest Boussourlin boy. And the two amusing redheads — the Carrots, as we call them — are my Nashchokin cousins, Nikita and Natalia, the children of Mamma's brother. Nikita is engaged to the eldest Shoustrovo girl and Natalia is married to the second Boussourlin boy."

She met his sheepish look with a sly laugh, then bumped her shoulder lightly into his arm for consolation. "Batiushka darling, you don't really have to remember all that, unless you want to discuss it with Aunt Dasha. And if you do, and you forget, and she scolds you, just scold her back. She adores being contradicted." She shot a quick glance over her shoulder at Johnnie. "Father Vikenty can never remember who's who in our family," she said in English. And then to Father Vikenty: "If you need a prompter, take Johnnie. He knows more about our genealogy than I do. He seems to have learned it by heart."

Father Vikenty detected a note of scorn in her voice, as though she ascribed Johnnie's interest solely to some cheap snobbery, and despised him a little for it. He, too, glanced over his shoulder. But Johnnie's brown eyes, with their soft Oriental texture which made them so conspicuous in an otherwise typically Nordic face, were big with amusement now, not resentment or pain, as they took in Natasha's irritation. "But of course," he laughed. "I'm impressed. A closed corporation of such antiquity."

Natasha turned away in annoyance, and Father Vikenty felt uncomfortable. It was obvious to him that she was still under Boukashov's spell and that Johnnie was the unwanted one today. He would have liked to scold her, warn her not to cheapen herself, not to misjudge this young man, but his attention was diverted to Sandra. She was standing a few feet away, listening; and he knew, just by looking at her, that she had no knowledge as yet of Natasha's new infatuation. She was thinking of another man, not Boukashov; and the unguarded look he intercepted in her eyes

shocked him. There was secret envy of Natasha in it, a contempt for Johnnie; and interwoven into it all was fear that Natasha would drop Johnnie and become a menace to her where Yuri Bourkevitch was concerned. She blushed, deeply, painfully, the moment she realized that Father Vikenty had read her thoughts, and quickly looked the other way; while he said in a low voice so that Natasha alone could hear him, "Ech, Natasha, don't sin before God, my dear. Blindness, you know, born of too much pride is sinful." And suddenly embarrassed by his rebuke, even though it had come out of the very depths of his affection for this girl, he turned and went into the long front room.

Ea Boussourlin, a smaller and more animated edition of her sister Sandra, was sitting at the piano. The other nine — all of them in their early or late twenties — stood around in a semi-circle, as the old Prince came out of the "little drawing room." He was a tall man, almost as tall as Father Vikenty; and Madame Pishnik's description of him as a capricious old goat could have been embroidered on by saying that he looked like a thoroughbred ram, grown petulant.

For the Prince was a man who had never been able to start again. In his youth he had been strong and active, full of protests, ready to face the evils of his day and wrestle with them. He had even been accused of liberal tendencies at one time. Later, the novelty of sudden expatriation and penury shared with so many others of his kind, and the conviction that it was all a temporary, heroic adventure, had carried him through those first years of taxi driving in Paris. But as hope of returning to Russia dwindled, the spark in him died. He hid behind his heart condition, which had never been a serious one, to subside into a fretful inactivity. And the realization that life had passed him by, that he was no longer needed, nor heeded, nor paid attention to, had brought secret bitterness and resentment. Gradually, everything that had been acquired a rosy tint, began to appear as a Paradise Lost. And without even noticing it, so gradual was the process, he got into the habit of indiscriminately praising the past and berating the present. And now all that was old Russia, he was. Even his small pointed beard seemed like a relic. And it was a mascot, too. He

had grown it at the age of thirty-seven, when he had been appointed governor of a province, to disguise his youthful appearance and give himself an air of greater dignity. Now it had become the sole tangible link between his former strength and his present weakness. And sometimes, when he fondled and stroked it, there would come into his eyes a nostalgic look, as though he were saying to himself, Beard! Carry me back to where I belong.

Father Vikenty hadn't seen him in several months and had forgotten how much Natasha's eyes resembled his — the same coloring, the same shape, the same upward tilt. And high up on his cheek there was a small furrow — a dimple grown permanent with age — which, when he smiled, seemed to draw the corner of his mouth up and the lid of his eye down a little, lending to his whole face an expression of jovial slyness. Next time, Father Vikenty said to himself, his thoughts traveling back for a moment to his fight with Mr. Owtch, tell them to go and look at his eyes and at Natasha's eyes, at his dimple and Natasha's dimple, and then come back and repeat that slander, if they dare.

His own eyes, in the meantime, had taken in the long front room. It was just as Johnnie had described it; only now, in readiness for the religious service, a small square table covered with a white cloth had been placed at one end to serve as a lectern, with an icon on it, and a cup for the holy water, and a sprig of boxwood with which to sprinkle the water around. The icon, encased in gold and studded with precious stones — an heirloom of the Tverskoy family discovered as by miracle in a Fifth Avenue store and redeemed at a high price by the late Joe Donovan — was lying against the white cloth, glistening in the sun. In this severe room, with its plain white paneling and early American furniture, it looked like some glittering phoenix arisen from its ashes. And yet it seemed to belong there now, wedded in all its barbaric splendor to the sober utilitarian grace of early New England woodcraft. And somehow it made Father Vikenty think of Princess Evdokia, the woman who had known how to blend within herself naturally and graciously the best from her past with the best in her present world.

A hum of conversation reached him from the back room, and

he strained his ear to distinguish her soft, well-modulated voice; but Countess Boussourlin's harsh and crackling tones and the soporific bark of her aged pug seemed to dominate all else.

He had shaken hands with the young people, and the Prince had said, "My wife is in the little drawing room," when the Princess herself appeared in the doorway. Her hair was white, her eyes two dark shadows in a tired face, which was yet not tired at all, reflecting a richness of inner warmth and beauty. A woman annealed by those same forces under which her husband's spirit had cracked. And although the years had brought weight to her tall and formerly slender body, her step was surprisingly light as she came forward, both hands outstretched in welcome. "I'm so glad, dear Batiushka, so glad you could come. Such a dreadful wind. So cold, too. I hope you are not frozen. And I hope you can stay for supper — a high tea, as they call it." She slipped her hand into his arm, leading him back into the room. "Come in here for a moment and see Dasha and the others."

Dasha, the old Countess, her sister-in-law, sat in the little drawing room, surrounded by five younger people, young only compared to her seventy-five years, for they were all in their middle or late fifties: Vladimir Nashchokin, known in the family as Vava, the Princess's brother, still very good-looking and even with a dash of youth, Madame Plodovitinoff — "Aunt Ella" of Natasha's recent complaints — a poor replica of her older sister, desiccated and shorn of grace; Sofka Shoustrovo, Aunt Dasha's widowed daughter, a big-boned, opulent, well-dressed woman, with dyed hair; Sergei Boussourlin, Aunt Dasha's son, tall, dark, slightly Mephistophelian in an innocuous sort of way; and the latter's wife, brilliantly blond once upon a time but now grown gray and mousy, a lady of many sighs and considerable insignificance, who, just to complicate matters a little more for Father Vikenty, was herself a Tverskoy by birth, though of a different branch of the family, distantly related, and was therefore condescendingly referred to by her mother-in-law as "one of those other Tverskoys, don't you know." But the old lady dominated them all with her somewhat formidable appearance and eccentric ways. She bore a strong resemblance to Prince Tverskoy, her twin brother — the

same high-bridged nose, the same thin long face and tilted eyes — only in her case the reversals of fortune, instead of breaking her spirit, had crystallized her into a character.

She had always been somewhat willful and capricious, but the first signs of eccentricity had manifested themselves at the time of her escape from Russia. Her husband had died on board ship somewhere between Constantinople and Malta, and when his canvas-covered body had vanished into the Mediterranean, a great shudder had seized her. "There! I will never eat fish again," she had cried, as though passing a life sentence on all the denizens of the deep. At first her family had tried to argue with her: "Fish is good for your bones . . . We are now eating fish from the Atlantic, not from the Mediterranean." But she had stubbornly shaken her head. "I'm thinking of somebody else's bones," and, "Don't be silly! The British can stop ships from going through the straits of Gibraltar, but they can't stop the fish." And she had stuck to her strange vow — she had never liked fish anyway — and it had given an impetus to other whims and fancies, until she had safely hidden herself behind a barrage of eccentricities, impervious to disillusionments, hardships, and change.

And now she was both judge and jester to her family. The slightest delinquency, the slightest breach of old-time proprieties, would bring forth a severe judgment from her, while in between time she would indulge in sallies that sometimes disregarded the proprieties if she felt like using a coarse or rude word.

She was sitting at the far end of the room when Father Vikenty entered with the Princess, and from under her chair came the monotonous wheezing bark of an invisible but outraged Bubulenka, her pet. She silenced the pug with a wave of her hand. "Enough, Bubulenka, enough. Yes, we all know a priest has come into the house, and there is nothing you can do about it." Then she smiled at Father Vikenty, revealing a row of long yellow teeth, a bit wobbly but still her own. "Ah, there he is. The great wrestler! Yes, yes, we've heard all about it. So that's how you treat former Bolsheviks? Knocking them down and laying them out on both shoulders? Now, don't blush, Batiushka. I'm proud of you. You know I don't like priests as a rule. They bring bad luck, except when they are performing their ecclesiastical duties,

and some of them have an odor. But you are different. Bubulenka doesn't think so, but I do. They say everyone has his pet Jew. But I say, All Jews are Yids. I've got a pet priest instead, and he is a darling!"

The room resounded with the complacent laughter of her relatives, topped by the Prince's nasal guffaw. The Princess alone remained aloof. The half smile she had worn on entering the room was still there, and her eyes, calm and discerning, were gazing at her sister-in-law out of their deep shadows. Yet Father Vikenty sensed that something had saddened her. He knew it instinctively, not by any sudden tension in her, but by a slight strain hidden somewhere behind that smile; so imperceptible he might not have noticed it if at the same moment he had not seen Natasha. She had been coming into the room, followed by Johnnie, when the Princess looked quickly around, the strain behind her smile suddenly visible. Natasha stopped, frowned, and then turned on her heels and went back into the other room, drawing Johnnie away with her.

For just an instant he wondered about it. He knew they couldn't have been offended on his behalf. Aunt Dasha had often told him in no uncertain terms about her superstitious abhorrence of priests, monks, and nuns — which incidentally did not prevent her from being extremely devout. And he couldn't guess what had upset them, nor did the old lady give him time to think. She was wagging her long finger at him now. "I hope you haven't brought that lecherous brute of a dog of yours. My Bubulenka never got over his last visit. The way he stuck his flat nose under her tail. Like a vacuum cleaner. Both her hind legs were in the air. He almost sucked her in! Poor Bubulenka had a heart attack afterwards." She frowned through her smile. "What are you laughing at, Batiushka? It isn't funny. I tell you, she has never been the same."

Father Vikenty knew from past experience that the only way to deal with the old lady was to pay her back in kind. He laughed softly into his beard. "Ech, dear Countess, heavy indeed are our sins, but such is the nature of the male beast. Haven't we all been dogs at times?"

She seemed delighted. Her smile spread into a grin, covering

her whole face with a net of tiny wrinkles. "So true! And we women have a little bitch sitting in us all of the time, thank God!" He saw the old eyes flick past his shoulders to where Aunt Ella stood, stiff and disapproving; and instantly the old face became roguish. The left corner of her mouth curled up a little, the left eyelid remained suspended in a kind of arrested wink, and the voice came issuing forth in a whisper that could be clearly heard throughout the room. "There are those among us who claim they haven't got one. But then just think what they must have missed! And there's one thing they don't know — the Lord God himself put that little bitch into us to make us less bitchy on the whole."

The Princess waved her hand at her with a good-natured laugh. "Oh, Dasha! What she won't say — " She then moved to her sister's side and spoke to her in a low voice, and Aunt Ella went out on some household errand.

Father Vikenty sighed to himself. He was anxious to capture a devotional mood for the performance of the religious service, and the old lady's conversation didn't suit him at all. Yet she was staring at him expectantly, waiting for some expression of appreciation of her wit. He hit on a compromise. "Shouldn't we bless the house first, Countess? And afterwards we can talk about dogs, too."

The Princess caught on to this. "Yes, let us have the blessing, Batiushka." She glanced at her husband for approval. She always did this when any decision had to be made, big or small, in a silent tribute to him, a recognition of him as the master. The Prince however accepted such tributes as a matter of course. He randly nodded his consent, looking serious and solemn, and Aunt Dasha began to fuss. She dragged a gasping, panting, protesting Bubulenka from under her chair and handed her over to her daughter. "Here, take her upstairs, Sofka. And see that Schnitzel and Punty are taken upstairs too." Then she stood up, her face suddenly severe, set and ready for stern devotion, while the Princess led the way into the front room. The hum of young voices, which had served as an accompaniment to the conversation of the older people, ceased abruptly, and the wind hurled itself against the house, rattling the shutters and windowpanes.

13

THE SERVICE was a short Te Deum, very different in its ambiance from the christening at Kolia Strelkin's. No curious, dissecting eyes here to pierce Father Vikenty's devotional mood; everything on this occasion was done with decorum, according to tradition, by people to whom the ritual itself was a part of their ancestral background. He could hear that light shifting of feet, that occasional discreet coughing behind him, and these familiar sounds, attesters to devotional strain rather than to any true participation in the prayers he was intoning, made him feel at home, in his own element. And the wind outside, with its howls and lamentations and insensate charges against the house, helped to create a feeling of encystment, as though this room with its small and pious congregation were a nucleus of prayer in a violent and overwrought world.

The Princess's brother and his redheaded son Nikita, her sister with her two daughters, Ea and Sandra — the Nashchokins were the musical side of the family — had formed a choir and were singing the responses to the prayers. When it came to the final orison calling for many years of blessings, in which Father Vikenty used to excel in the days of his youth, his voice rose in an increasing crescendo, a little frayed and shaky now but still able to fill this comparatively small room and tingle through the hearts of his listeners — "Unto thy servants, Prince Andrey and Princess Evdokia, grant, O Lord, length of days, a peaceful life, health, salvation, and prosperity in all things; and preserve them for many years." And the small improvised choir took up the last two words, not in the sweeping uplift of that cathedral choir of long ago, but in demure harmony: "Many years, many years, many years — "

Taking the cup of holy water in one hand, Father Vikenty

dipped the sprig of boxwood in it and sprinkled the room. After that, led by the Prince and followed by the others, he started on a slow procession through the house. Originally the house had been a square one, but by a slow process of accretion throughout the years the ground floor had extended itself into two ells, one off the little drawing room, containing a master bedroom, a small boudoir-study, and a bathroom; the other off the dining room, consisting of a pantry, a kitchen, and a servant's room and bath. Everywhere Father Vikenty stopped and sprinkled and said a short prayer. When they reached the front hall, he took the lead, climbing slowly up the narrow stairs. At the top he paused to orient himself.

He was facing a long corridor now, with the back stairs at the far end of it, and doors on either side, all of them open in readiness for him except one. He went into each bedroom, blessing it, until at length he stood near the back stairs, facing the closed door. Before anyone could stop him he had flung the door open, and pandemonium broke loose. Barking, yapping, squealing, the three dogs came running out — Suleiman-the-Magnificent-Schnitzel, as Natasha sometimes laughingly called him, with his blade-like tail straight in the air, Bubulenka hoarse with outrage and fury, and Punty emitting shrieks of excitement and joy.

"Take them away, take them away," cried Aunt Dasha. Other voices, less articulate and loud than hers but just as anxious, sounded through the corridor, but Father Vikenty paid no attention to them. He sprinkled the dogs with the holy water. "Dogs are also God's children," he said.

Punty was standing on his hind legs now, one paw pressed against Father Vikenty's leg, looking up keenly at the sprig of boxwood, all set to catch it; and because he was Punty, Natasha's dog, Father Vikenty gave him an extra sprinkling. "Yes, Poontic, yes. God loves you. He does."

Natasha, pushing her way through the others, came running down the corridor. She picked up Punty and held him close, pressing her cheek against his round head and looking up at the same time at Father Vikenty. "Darling Batiushka," she murmured by way of expressing all that she felt. And the Princess

came hurrying to their side. "Batiushka," she said in a low voice, her smiling face touched with inner emotion, "that was very nice."

For just an instant he stared at them in surprise. Then he blushed. His action had been a spontaneous one, full of love, devoid of any artifice; but now that they had made an issue of it he began to feel as if he had been playing a part. In his embarrassment, meaning to give them a final blessing, he sprinkled the holy water over their heads with such vigor they were forced to shut their eyes, wrinkling their noses; and still more embarrassed now by his own clumsiness, he made a hurried exit down the back stairs.

He took refuge in the deserted dining room, where he began to disrobe, throwing an occasional glance at the old-fashioned wallpaper that covered three of the walls, at the white paneling around the open fireplace, and at the big dinner table in the center of the room. Presently, to his surprise, it was Johnnie, not one of the Russian young men, who came in to help him pack the suitcase. That Johnnie was anxious to talk to him, he sensed at once. Was it of Natasha's coldness, or of his own feelings? He didn't know, nor could he bring himself to ask questions. At this point, knowing all he did, what could he say? The thought alone made him feel self-conscious and inept. Making himself impervious to all further impressions, anxious to slide over this moment as quickly as possible yet feeling somewhat of a shirker for doing so, he busied himself laying out his vestments on the dinner table and folding them, exclaiming now and then, "Like this, Johnnie, like this. Tanks."

Sandra passed through the room on her way to the kitchen, paying no attention to them, her head thrown slightly back, that enigmatic smile frozen on her dark handsome face. "Where to, Sandra?" Johnnie called after her when she had already reached the kitchen door. She paused for just a second. "Someone has to attend to the supper," she said. There was a touch of resentment, a concealed bite to her voice. Then she was gone, and Father Vikenty's eyes met Johnnie's. Those soft brown eyes looked a little weary. Everything is so tense today, everything is so tense, they seemed to say. Yet there was a hidden smile in

them, too. And Father Vikenty, still playing the shirker, was determined to encourage only the lighter side of things. "Sandra very serious young woman," he said, chuckling into his beard, and gave Johnnie the folded vestments.

While Johnnie, bending over the suitcase, was packing Father Vikenty's belongings, Aunt Ella — Sandra's mother — came in from the long front room and stopped in the doorway. She frowned slightly, then went straight up to Father Vikenty, dry and stiff, not regal and proud as she undoubtedly fancied herself. As usual, he felt a shriveling sensation at her approach. To the big, lusty, life-absorbing man in him this spinsterish, unawakened mother of three grown women was somehow repellent. What he called "really sinful thoughts" would crop up in his mind when he met her — How could any man have married this woman, unless it was for her money (for the Nashchokins had been very wealthy once upon a time)? Yet this woman had meanly repaid her husband for his venality, submitting herself to the act of procreation with set teeth and then allowing him to die unlamented.

Father Vikenty braced himself for the encounter. After all, he was a priest; had been one long enough not to have to remind himself about it. And perhaps I am maligning the poor woman, so forgive me God. She does sometimes mention her husband with a sigh.

"Batiushka, I wish you would speak to Natasha," Aunt Ella said in Russian, deliberately ignoring, so it seemed to him, Johnnie's presence. "She might listen to you. It's bad enough for her to be living alone at her age, she is now rapidly going downhill. Wants to have every man at her feet! Where will the girl end, I ask you, if this goes on? She can't even leave my poor Sandra's young man alone." She slightly jerked her head in Johnnie's direction. "Why doesn't she stick to this one? He's in love with her. He is well off, and seems to be a decent young man." There was a core of truth in what she was saying, but the way it was said was maddening — abrupt, deliberate sentences that seemed to lay down the law and preclude any argument. "Last night for over two hours she talked to her mother about that former Bolshe-

vik she met with you, singing his praises. She is quite shameless about such things, you know. My poor sister is quite upset about it." Father Vikenty looked down at his feet. Her words were like stabs because he didn't dare answer them for fear of losing his temper. He wished the Princess had not confided Natasha's secret to her. And yet, he consoled himself, perhaps Aunt Ella would not betray it. For as far as he was concerned, there was one redeeming point about this woman — her unquestionable devotion to her elder sister.

Aunt Ella sighed; a harsh little sigh, born in her throat, not in her heart. "I thank God for one thing! My Sandra at least has taken after my sister." And with that, she too was gone, joining her daughter in the adjacent kitchen.

Father Vikenty glanced at Johnnie, wondering how much he had understood. The words "Natasha" and "Bolshevik" had been pronounced clearly and plainly. Johnnie was leaning against the mantel, his hands in his trouser pockets; but although the pose seemed indolent and careless, Father Vikenty felt a tenseness behind it.

Johnnie's smile was strained. "Natasha is in the doghouse," he said.

Father Vikenty nodded. There was no doubt about it, Natasha was in disgrace with some members of her family. Her father, although she had wrenched an unwilling consent from him, had not yet forgiven her for moving into an apartment of her own. Her Aunt Dasha had always been outraged by her show of independence. Now her maternal aunt had lined herself up with the other two. "Yes, Johnnie," he said sadly, "Yes."

"It's odd," Johnnie went on, "but she deliberately gets herself into trouble. It seems to be her way of asserting herself."

Father Vikenty gazed at Johnnie for a moment, then ventured a smile to conceal the pity he felt for him. "Ech, Johnnie, it will pass."

"Yes, I know, but — " Johnnie hesitated. He came up to Father Vikenty, blushing a little. "Could I see you alone some time, sir? I'd like to have a talk with you. Will you be in church tomorrow afternoon?"

"Tomorrow — ?" Father Vikenty dragged out the word as though in it alone lay the whole point of Johnnie's question. Actually he was giving himself time. He still felt fearful of an interview with Johnnie, not knowing what to say to him. The fear however lasted but a moment. Something suddenly opened up in him. "Tomorrow," he said, "I go at five to Professor Bourkevitch. Before five, in church, I have one wedding and two services for the dead."

"And where does Professor Bourkevitch live?"

"Near Columbia University, Johnnie."

"Well, then, if I came around four-thirty, we could have a talk, and I could then drive you over to the Bourkevitches. How about it, sir?"

His brown eyes were earnest and a little pleading, and Father Vikenty beamed his kindest, his best smile on him. "Fine, Johnnie, fine. Very indeed. Fanks."

Well, he said to himself, as followed by Johnnie he crossed the long front room on his way to the little drawing room, two things I have done. I've blessed the house and I've learned a little more about Johnnie. Now to fulfil Madame Pishnik's request and talk the Prince into attending the Concert-Ball, so help me God! For the Prince's long silences and frowns that afternoon had clearly testified to a bilious and crotchety mood.

14

IN THE LONG ROOM the improvised lectern had been removed. Some of the young people stood round the piano, singing; others were lounging about drinking highballs. Their singing and their laughter and chatter filled the room. The little drawing room by contrast seemed very silent; and the wind, working itself up now into a frenzy, could be clearly heard. The Princess sat on a big sofa, knitting a garment for one of her numerous grandchildren. At one end of the room Vava Nashchokin, Sofka Shoustrovo, Sergei Boussourlin, and his wife had settled down to a rubber or two of bridge; at the other, the Prince and his sister were leaning over a small table, playing a game of *birulki*; and Natasha was watching them. Bubulenka for once was fast asleep under her mistress' chair.

The game of *birulki* — the Russian equivalent of jackstraws — consisted of a hundred or so tiny little pieces representing household objects and kitchen utensils — pots, pans, cups, saucers, plates, chairs, tables, knives, spoons, forks — all of them carved of wood. They were kept in a barrel-shaped container made of fine Karelian birch; and at the beginning of each game the container would be placed upside down on the table and then removed, leaving the *birulki* in a heap. The players, armed with little awls, took turns in extracting the tiny objects out of the pile one by one, without stirring any of the others. At the slightest hairsplit of a stir the player lost his turn, and the one who got the last of the *birulki* won the game.

Johnnie on entering shot a quick glance at Natasha, but getting no response — she was watching the game, her face set and sullen — he went over to the bridge table. At a sign from the Princess Father Vikenty came and sat down beside her on the sofa. The

wind hurled itself against the house, rattling the shutters. "I wish it would stop," she said. "It makes me nervous." To her relief the wind seemed to subside a little, but in its place arose an angry altercation between the Prince and his sister: "Stop! You moved it, Dasha." "I did not! Where? Where? Nothing has moved." "It has. That one." "It did not! You lie! Natasha, switch on the lights, I can't see a damn thing!" And as the lights went on, silence enveloped the room, enhanced by a new onslaught of the wind and by the gay voices in the adjacent room.

Father Vikenty could have profited by this moment to speak to the Princess about the Concert-Ball, but he felt it would be taking unfair advantage of her. She would probably give in out of the goodness of her heart, later to face her husband's ill humor. He preferred to tackle the Prince in person and in the open. And he sat in silence, watching the Princess's large deft hands — white and delicate once upon a time but labor-worn now around the tips of the fingers — manipulating with what seemed to him lightning rapidity the knitting needles and the pale blue yarn. Presently she lowered her work to her lap and looked at him, her eyes weary. The light from a lamp fell on them now and he could see their blueness through the shadows which years of renunciation and relinquishment had laid upon them, heavy and indelible. "Tell me, Batiushka, what is this Boukashov like?" She spoke very low so that he alone could hear her, her voice calm yet with an undertone of anxiety. She tried to shrug it off, laughing a little at her own fears and at Natasha's strange whims.

Father Vikenty leaned closer to her. "Just a man who is feeling lost. Princess, dear Princess, don't you worry. Natasha has too much of you in her. I swear to God!" He had intended it to be a whisper, but as usual his rumbling bass carried it far beyond its intended reach. He caught Natasha's warning eye upon him, and saw the Prince look up from his game and make a wry face. The Princess saw it, too. She smiled at Father Vikenty, touching her lips with her finger to impose silence, and resumed her work. And everything was peaceful and quiet for a while; then suddenly an angry croak escaped Aunt Dasha. The Prince had won. They had played this game all their lives and he had almost always won, and

always she would pick up whatever was handy and threaten him with it. She was brandishing a sword-shaped paper knife now, crying out, "It is impossible to play with you, Andrey!"

"It isn't my fault that you've got such clumsy fingers," he retorted with a smug smile.

"My fingers are not clumsy. It's your fingers that are crooked. The fingers of a pickpocket. Yes, that's what they are! Oliver Twist, Oliver Twist, Oliver Twist!"

He shrugged, half in annoyance and half in jest. "If that's how you feel, I'm sorry I ever brought these *birulki* out of Russia."

"You brought them out of Russia? I like that! I brought them out!"

The four at the bridge table looked around, and three voices sounded almost in unison:

"You did not, Mamma," came from Sofka.

"Neither did he," laughed Vava.

"And who cares anyway?" exclaimed Sergei, his thin features sharpened by a frown of annoyance; while his wife — "One of those other Tverskoys, don't you know" — signed.

With a last defiant thrust of her paper knife Aunt Dasha suddenly gave in and burst into a crackling laugh. The others laughed, too; and once again the Prince's nasal guffaws topped them all. Profiting by this outburst of hilarity, Father Vikenty bent closer to the Princess. "Who did bring those *birulki* out of Russia?" he asked, puzzled.

She smiled, closing her eyes for an instant and pointing to herself. "I did. I don't know why. My boys liked the game, and I remember how I snatched it up at the last moment before leaving the house. One does strange things when one is fleeing for one's life."

The quiet irresistible charm of this woman was strongly upon him, as always. The way she had of laughing a little at herself and poking fun at her own weaknesses and absurdities he found delightful. Natasha had inherited that trait from her. And he was making a mental comparison between mother and daughter when his attention was diverted to the bridge table. Vava had sprung to his feet with the alacrity of youth he no longer possessed. A

cracking of joints betrayed this. But his figure was surprisingly trim, and he knew it, as he stood there, one arm outstretched to call for silence and one eye fixed on Sofka's big laughing face. "How about some whiskey, Batiushka?" he asked. And when Father Vikenty said "Yes," he turned to Aunt Dasha. "And you?"

"Two drops of bourbon on the rocks."

Having asked all the others in turn, he now leaned, intimate and possessive, over the back of Sofka's chair, questioning her with his eyes. Father Vikenty was reminded of some gossip he had heard about them, some talk of an approaching marriage, but he let the matter drop from his mind as so much useless ballast. He was watching for a propitious moment in which to broach the question of the Concert-Ball.

Vava, meanwhile, had counted all those present with his finger, ending with himself — "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten." He stepped to the open door and called out to his son, "Nikita, nine highballs please, and two drops of bourbon on the rocks for Aunt Dasha."

This would have been a good moment for Father Vikenty to tackle the Prince, but he hesitated, seized by a sudden secret dread of what might happen. Likely as not, he thought, the Prince in his present mood would take it badly, and the others would fall silent, which wouldn't help. For although he always felt at home with the Princess, he was never quite at his ease with her relatives when they were gathered like this in a group. They were different somehow from the people among whom he had lived all his life. There was an assurance about them, intimidating by its very lack of ostentation or bravado; they always spoke with self-confidence, no matter how modestly they expressed themselves, and their silences were proud and exclusive. At least so they seemed to him. Secretly he scolded himself for his timorousness, while listening to the animated conversation around him; but still he hesitated. And presently he found that he had missed his opportunity. Nikita — redheaded, freckled, with a jolly grin; some of his American friends called him "Irish" — had brought in the drinks on a tray and had served them around. He had lingered for a moment in front of Johnnie, motioning with his head in the direction of the outer room, and had then left. Now it was Sergei Boussourlin

who was holding forth; and it was he, with his sly baiting of his uncle, who really started that unpleasant incident Father Vikenty was never after able to eradicate from his mind.

"Ducky," Sergei exclaimed, using the name by which the Princess was known in the family — a pet name given her in her childhood by a nurse, whose English ears found it more endearing and more euphonious than the unfamiliar Eudoxia and its Russian version of Evdokia. "When you are settled down here for good and become a resident of Connecticut, you will be able to air your views and vote at the local town meetings. I hear it's quite an experience. A wonderful demonstration of the workings of democracy." He had turned to the Prince now, in full awareness of course of his uncle's reactionary views. "But you, Uncle Andrey, you won't be able to do that. You are not an American citizen. It's a pity."

"I never became an American citizen," the Prince replied in lofty tones, "because I took my oath too seriously. I am grateful to this country. There is much in it I admire, and I'll be loyal to it, but my first allegiance will always be to Russia. Not Russia of today of course, but a decent, clean, resurrected Russia, which I will probably never live to see, but to which I shall always belong."

Noble sentiments, Father Vikenty thought, but inappropriate to his nephew's chaffing. Sergei was shaking his head, pretending to sigh. "I know, but it's a pity all the same. Now you'll never be able to find out for yourself what democracy really stands for." His smile as he said this would have been truly Mephistophelean for once, if the inoffensive, merry twinkle in his eyes hadn't clearly indicated that he was just having a good time pulling his uncle's leg.

But the Prince rose to the bait. The implication that he might learn something from a local town meeting was apparently more than he could stand. "Learn?" he cried. "What is there for me to learn? In Russia we had the *mir* long before America was thought of, only it wasn't called democracy. And what is democracy, I ask you, but a vague word which everyone twists to his own purpose and liking?" Had he stopped there a sensible argument might still have been possible, but running afoul of himself, irritated by his own senseless irritation, he burst into a lengthy harangue, at

once mystical and obscure. Old prerevolutionary Russia alone stood out in it as a paragon of virtue, and socialism in all its forms and facets lay condemned as the root of all evil. "Mark my words," he cried, "the world will never recover from its ills until socialism has been stamped out!" There was no stopping him now. Stung by his nephew's quizzical smile, he grew more clamorous, shouting "Let me finish" and "Don't interrupt" whenever anyone tried to speak, until, one prejudice leading to another, he finally hit on his pet intolerance, thundering, "And who is at the bottom of it? Who is to blame for it all? The Jews of course!"

"All Jews are Yids," snapped Aunt Dasha.

This sudden championing of his cause seemed to take some of the wind out of his sails. It was like scoring a point and then feeling embarrassed about it. His voice sounded a little more subdued as he said, "Yids. Yes, that's right. Those Yids! All I ask for now is to be allowed to die in peace without ever laying eyes on a single one of them." But when Natasha tried to put in a word, he turned on her with sudden savagery. "As for you, young lady, kindly keep out of this. You chose to lead your own life, so keep your opinions to yourself, too. You've done everything, everything to hurt my feelings. You've made friends with people I disapproved of — that actress, Terenteeva, for instance, and her lover. But I no longer care what you do. And if you chose to hobnob with Jews now, I wouldn't give a damn. But I'll thank you not to bring them to my house!"

Bubulenka awoke under her mistress's chair with a start, giving vent to a series of frantic wheezes and barks. Father Vikenty sat crushed and speechless. He had seen the frenzy of petulance in the Prince's eyes, the icy look, so close to hatred, which had hit Natasha like a slap in the face. It dug hollows in Father Vikenty's heart. He recognized it for what it was — adoration turned to temporary loathing because the subject of his adoration had not lived up to a set ideal — but no amount of ratiocinations could stem the rising tide of his indignation. His innate kindness and goodness were bruised and battered on Natasha's behalf; yet his instinct told him he must keep out of this — it was something for the family to handle.

He looked at the Princess. She seemed intent on her knitting, her lips drawn into a thin hard line, which made her look like her sister; but he also saw a barely perceptible twitch at the corner of her mouth. Not lack of courage but foresight of what would happen kept her silent. Later, when alone with her husband, she would undoubtedly say, "Not everything was good in old Russia, my friend. Not everything is bad about socialism. And the Jews are human beings. But whatever your views, don't hurt Natasha. You gave her your permission to live alone. Be gracious about it now. Young people take a long time to forget such hurts."

Yes, that would come later, and the Prince would suffer silent pangs of remorse, but Natasha was there now, flushed to the very roots of her hair, her suffering clearly depicted all over her face. Aunt Dasha could not be counted on to help her, she was hand in glove with her brother in this. Moreover, she was too busy now consoling Bubulenka to notice her niece's discomfiture. He glanced at the bridge table, but three of the players had cloaked themselves in that proud, exclusive silence of theirs; while the third, Sergei's wife, met his anxious glance with a doleful shake of the head and sighed one of her ineffectual sighs. He caught a glimpse of Nikita Nashchokin's freckled face in the doorway. He was beckoning impatiently to Johnnie; and Johnnie, who had been standing with puckered brows, puzzled, trying to understand what it was all about and perhaps understanding some of it, waved back to Nikita and hurried out of the room.

Natasha got up. She went to the door, her shoulders squared, her head thrown back; but there she stopped, hesitated, then turned to her father. There was a set smile on her face now, with tears pressing close behind it. Her lips and cheeks quivered slightly in an effort to hold them back, but her eyes were dry, full of the hot temper and the proud obstinacy of the Tverskoys. An inchoate, aching anxiety gripped Father Vikenty. He raised his hand to warn her against speaking, but she didn't see him. She was looking straight at her father. "I've a good mind to marry a Jew," she said, trying hard to sound ironical. "Just to see how you will take it."

"If you do, never come near me again," cried Aunt Dasha.

But the Prince, his face as red as Natasha's, took refuge this time in sarcasm. "I couldn't care less. You'd no longer be a Tverskoy, so it wouldn't matter."

She had with deliberate malice provoked him in front of them all, now his cruel retort gave impetus to a final retaliation. "But my children would still be your grandchildren. You couldn't change that." And she was gone, leaving a confusion of raised eyebrows, sighs, and overt glances behind her.

Curiously enough, and also typically so, Aunt Dasha had never known a single Jew in her life. The Prince had met a few of the kind he called "enlightened." He had liked them well enough, saying of each one individually, "Well, he of course is different." But he never thought of Jews as individuals. The word "Jew" evoked in his mind a ghetto, a pungent smell of garlic, a rabble of gesticulating men in long soiled coats and wavy side curls, both arrogant and servile as the despised and persecuted can so often be. And only the Princess's occasional reminder — "Jews are human beings" — could make him, when in a quiet frame of mind, view the matter in a more sober light.

She was speaking to him now, her voice low and soothing. "Why do you excite yourself so, my friend? It's bad for your blood pressure. You know what the doctor said." He came and stood beside her, laying his hand on her head for just a moment, as though to draw unto himself some of the peace and calm of her soul; a gesture at once tender and pathetic, indicative of his dependence on her spirit and strength. "Ah, Ducky," he sighed. "Why is she — Why must she be like that?"

"She is your daughter, Andrey."

He moved away, impatient again, to the darkened window, and remained there with his back to the room, gently drumming on the windowpane.

"Four no trumps," cried Sergei.

"Five no trumps," sighed his wife.

"What do you mean, five no trumps, when I've got three aces in my hand?"

"But I've got none, Sergei!"

And Sergei threw his cards in anger on the table. "God damn it, Lisa! When will you learn to play bridge?"

It was not a good moment to speak of the Concert-Ball. Yet would there be a better one, Father Vikenty asked himself, now that father and daughter had abused and tormented one another and neither would give in or relent? Besides, he no longer cared about the Prince's feelings, and his big booming voice filled the pause. "Ech, Prince, we are all so sorry you don't intend to come to our Concert-Ball. We need your support. And it won't look well if the Princess, our president, isn't present."

The Prince turned sharply around. "It's my wife you want, not me. And who gave you the idea I was preventing her from going? By all means let her go, if she doesn't mind rubbing shoulders with men like Bourkevitch, one of those low-down miserable cutworms who undermined the Russian Empire and brought on the abdication of the Tsar. Oh yes, I know, he whines over the evils of bolshevism now, calling on all Russians to unite in their fight against it. But he was one of those who disunited us in the first place and made all these evils possible, he and his Jewish friends. By all means let her go. Let them all go. Only leave me out of it!"

"But the church — " Father Vikenty began.

The Prince cut him short. "I go to church to pray. I will buy a few tickets to support it financially. What else do you want of me?"

"Nothing."

Father Vikenty knew he was beaten. The Princess, although she had said nothing, would stay away from the Concert-Ball so long as her husband felt this way; and likely as not the others would buy no tickets, or would buy just one and not go, for most of them were in strained financial circumstances. Like a child he felt hurt, thinking not of himself but of the church he loved. He could almost see all its flickering lights wincing in unison at the slight. But the feeling did not last. Who am I, he said to himself, to be depressed? My church is the house of God.

And with his equilibrium regained, his good humor returned and he entertained them all at supper, which was served in the dining room, with reminiscences of those first religious instructions he had given Natasha in her childhood. "What a child, what a child she was! So inquisitive, so anxious to learn, so discerning.

Sometimes she would pin me to the wall with her questions, and I'd stand there gasping, not knowing what to say, I swear to God! Like the time I told her about the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, and she interrupted me right in the middle of it, fierce-like, don't you know. What kind of god is this you are telling me about Father Vikenty, who stands as a pillar of fire and swears? But Natashenka, I said, the Jews were disobeying Moses, you know, they were being unruly, he had to scold them now and then. And do you know what she said? She said, Well, according to Papa, they are still unruly in spite of all his swearing!" His big hearty laugh sounded through the room, echoed by the others round the table. "And when we came to the New Testament," he went on after a pause, "I remember I was telling her about Annas and Caiaphas, and how they had persecuted our Lord. Were they bishops? she asked me all of a sudden. Now what was I to say? If I had said no, I might have been detected in a lie. If I had said yes, she might have taken a hate to all bishops. Oh, what a child, what a child!"

Even Natasha laughed and the Prince gave one of his nasal guffaws, although they still avoided looking at one another. And when supper was over, Father Vikenty got ready to leave. The Princess tried to detain him, but he said he had to go — the sick woman he had visited the night before was still alive and might need his ministrations. Natasha, too, was anxious to leave, and it was decided that those who had come down that morning in Johnnie's car would take the late train, while Johnnie and Natasha would drive Father Vikenty back to town.

They all came out to see him him off, crowding into the front hall, the Prince, the Princess, and Aunt Dasha standing in the center of a semicircle. The wind seemed to have reached the height of its violence, howling and lashing at the house. Under the strain of the past hour — and many other similar hours no doubt — something in the Princess seemed to give way. Her face became almost petulant. "Oh, that wind," she cried. "How I hate it! It gets on my nerves so!"

With a wide sweep of his arms, as though to persuade a naughty and unruly child, Father Vikenty turned in the direction of the

front door. "Really, Wind, what is all this fracas about? Have you no fear of God? Go your way. Leave us in peace, and God be with you."

And suddenly all was still.

A pause had come in the storm. It lasted for a minute or two until the wind changed to blow itself out in lesser gusts; but the timing was perfect. To all those present it came as a suspended heartbeat, a catch of the breath; and the fact that Father Vikenty alone remained unconscious of this served to enhance the solemnity, the sanctity of the moment. For it was within him, not without, that a miracle had been made manifest. There exists in every man's life a recurring instant of purity and innocence when, awakening from a long night's sleep, he lies lucid yet untrameled by recollection and desire; and it was to the essence of moments such as these that Father Vikenty's state of mind might perhaps be best compared. He stood facing the others now, quite unconscious of the effect he had created and the emotions he had aroused. And the very first thought that came into his head was on his lips before he knew it, as he looked at the Prince and said, "But all the same, I'm sorry you aren't coming to our concert-ball."

"I will be there," the Prince said in a humbled voice.

"We'll all be there," the others cried. And Aunt Dasha was heard to exclaim, "I shan't. I'm too old for that sort of thing. But I'll see to it that they get there, especially Andrey."

And rejoicing over the Prince's sudden change as over some precious gift, Father Vikenty bowed in humble gratitude and departed.

15

FATHER VIKENTY slept late the next day. The woman on upper Madison Avenue had died in the early hours of the morning, and he had remained at her side to the very end. He awoke now to a prod. He hardly dared open his eyes so certain was he that Ivan Ivanovitch stood there ready to hand him a thunderous episcopal rescript from Archbishop Sofrony, enumerating his transgressions and charging him with assault and battery. For in his own mind his attack on Mr. Owtch was the gravest of his offenses; it still weighed heavily on his conscience. Somewhere deep within himself he secretly wished the Archbishop would penalize him for it; some rigorous exacted formal penance, he thought, might perhaps cleanse him of the ignominious deed. But when he finally opened one cautious eye, he found no Ivan Ivanovitch there; only Dragoon prodding him with his paw, and the clock near his bed pointing to ten.

"Oh, holy fathers!" He threw his sheet and blanket back and swung himself into a sitting position, groaning a little at the stiffness of his aging back. And thrusting his big pale feet into a flattened pair of felt slippers, he ran in his long white night gown across the room. But in front of the icons he stopped, crossed himself, bowed, closing his eyes; and his short, almost abrupt prayer came straight from his heart: "Instruct me, guide me, lead me! For thine is the world and evermore shall be so."

He hurriedly washed and dressed, thinking of the busy day ahead of him; then took Dragoon for a quick walk around the block. Back in his kitchen, he brewed himself some tea, got a slice of ham out of the refrigerator, and ate a hasty breakfast.

Dragoon was particularly restless and frisky that morning, pawing his master's knee, whirling in circles in a vain effort to catch

his own almost nonexistent tail, finally bending forward with a bark, his rear stuck high up in the air. "Yes, Dragoonushka, yes. I know. You are young and strong, and hot blood is coursing in your veins. And what can a busy old priest do about it, except to box and wrestle with you now and then?"

He gave Dragoon a light cuff, and Dragoon gave it back. He gave him another, and quick as lightning it was returned. A third, a fourth exchange of cuffs, and they were roughhousing it all over the kitchen and into the next room. Dragoon in his excitement, as good boxers will, lost all sense of proportion. He tore savagely at Father Vikenty's sleeve, held his knee between his front legs as in a vise, flung himself at him, almost knocking him off his feet. "Oh, you big devil. You think you know a trick or two, eh? You think you can lay me out on both shoulders." Father Vikenty chuckled. "Well, you just wait and see." And applying a half nelson, he rolled Dragoon over on his back, pinning him to the floor. And bending over the wriggling dog, he emitted with a sharp shake of loosened cheeks and lips a kind of wobbly growl. "Not Boukashov this time," he cried, "but Dragoon Vikentievitch Kadilov!"

Dragoon was all set to go on with the game, but when Father Vikenty reached for his hat and coat, he flopped down on the floor and stuck his nose between his paws in sudden and complete dejection. "Ech, Dragoon, Dragoonushka, it's a dog's life, isn't it? But as Saint Paul the Apostle said, We are perplexed but not in despair. Yes, that's it, and don't you forget it. Tomorrow I won't be quite so busy. We'll go for a long walk in the park." But Dragoon found no solace in these words, and Father Vikenty dolefully shook his head. "Ech, Dragoon, my dear, such is the difference between man and dog. Man is forever hopeful because he has a conception of the future, but a poor dog has none." And sighing he went out, unable to meet those round, disconsolate, reproachful eyes.

Yes, Father Vikenty had a busy day ahead of him: at eleven-thirty an Office for the Dead; at one o clock a business lunch with the trustees of the church; at two-thirty a wedding; at three-thirty a memorial service for a soldier killed the year before in Korea.

Life and death formed an alternating pattern in his daily routine.

The wedding, he knew, would be a joyless event, in which the groom would look glum and the bride would face the altar, heavy with child. He had known them both since they were born and had few illusions about their future happiness. A sad business. Yes, a sad, sad business, he said to himself as he entered the church at a quarter past two.

Ivan Ivanovitch and Madame Pishnik were already there to help him with the services — read the psalms and sing the responses. His eyes searched the little man, suddenly apprehensive in spite of his secret desire to be chastised. What does he know? How much has he told on me? But Ivan Ivanovitch at the other end of the church pretended to be busy over the psalter. Why should I torment myself with conjectures and guesses? What has been done has been done. I'll find out soon enough. And forcing himself to forget Ivan Ivanovitch, and the Archbishop, and the retributions that might come his way, he turned to Madame Pishnik.

Her big pulsating exuberant presence was at once comforting and stimulating. "Like a tide," Natasha had once said, "it just comes at you." And she was coming at him now, bursting with curiosity. "What news, Batiushka? What luck with Prince Tverskoy?"

"He promised to come."

"I knew it! I knew you could do it! You alone, you alone! Now for the same results with Professor Bourkevitch and Terenteeva, and all will be well!" She thrust out her arm in a sweeping gesture of triumph, and her hat — that purple velvet toque she always wore — slid back an inch or two. She shoved it into place with the open palm of her hand.

Her confidence was cheering. It was good to know she had such trust in him. He tried to express his gratitude in a big warm smile. But his own trust lay in his church, and he looked at it now with loving eyes. "They will come," he said in a low yet vibrant voice, his eyes suddenly lost in distant visions. "They can't help it. First our concert-ball, then the church itself will draw them together. You just wait and see. One of these days,

here in this church, they will find all their differences, all their likes and dislikes melting away. And you will see them then, united."

Madame Pishnik shook her head, dubious and wise. "Don't fool yourself with idle fantasies, Batiushka. The Lord God Himself couldn't make some of them see eye to eye."

But he remained unperturbed. "You just wait and see."

The wedding was all that Father Vikenty had expected it to be; the memorial service, a kingdom of loneliness and sorrow, filled with a widow's silent grief over the loss of her only child. And when it was over, and Father Vikenty had emerged from behind the high altar screen in his street clothes, he found that Ivan Ivanovitch and Madame Pishnik had left. Madame Pishnik was forever running errands for the church; Ivan Ivanovitch must have fled from his presence — or from his own stricken conscience — he did not know which, nor did he really care. He was glad they were gone. No need now to take Johnnie into that sordid little office at the back of the Club. Here, in his beloved church, the inspiration he needed would come to him, for he still felt shy of this forthcoming talk with Johnnie. He looked at his favorite icon of the Virgin. From behind the flickering lights the dark peaceful eyes looked back at him in gentle fixity.

The sound of hurried footsteps fell upon his ears. He turned to find Johnnie coming toward him, his smile a quiver in a tightly locked face. But his handclasp was outgoing and warm. Father Vikenty had not noticed its vitality before — or perhaps he hadn't shaken hands with Johnnie until then. There was frankness and warmth in that handclasp, which he returned with all the heartiness he could muster. And suddenly secret inner valves seemed to loosen up, and shyness and embarrassment fled as though they had never been there at all. And Father Vikenty led the way to a row of chairs near a wall, where they sat down. And Johnnie was speaking of Natasha, unrestrained, the muscles of his face relaxing, his confidence increasing momently. "She is so honest, Father. So blunt at times. Sometimes I think she creates these situations deliberately, putting herself and others to the test, afraid that life might be offering her something of no consequence.

She has a fear of committing herself, too. A fear of boundaries and finality. She is still very young, you know. Much younger than her twenty-five years. A difficult, troublesome stage, with dark tunnelings in which she gets lost and thinks of no one but herself. I understand it, but it's hard on a fellow all the same."

"What she do now, Johnnie?"

"She told me to keep away from her for two weeks, except for Wednesday night — that's the night we've both been invited to Terenteeva's birthday party. She said she needed two weeks in which to take stock of herself, compare me with other men, find out what it was all about. As if she could do that in two weeks' time? But that's Natasha for you."

"Yes. And you are wise for your age, Johnnie."

A lonely flicker of a smile touched Johnnie's lips. "I have some ancient, long-suffering blood in me. I never gave it much thought until now, never was made to feel conscious of it until I met Natasha and her family."

A boding of things foreshadowed, already dimly guessed at, came upon Father Vikenty. Subconsciously he knew that, once revealed and established, they would be disturbing to him, and he tried to by-pass them with an irrelevant question: "Yes? And how long you know Natasha?"

"Oh, about a year — "

Still hedging, Father Vikenty ignored the real issue: "Well, you love her, Johnnie, you understand her. That is only importance."

Johnnie hesitated. "I do love her, sir. And I think I understand her. But that's beside the point — Oh, if you mean Natasha is worth waiting for, I couldn't agree with you more. She is honest and absolutely loyal. She gets it from her parents. I'm thinking of her mother's great integrity, and also of her father's pathetic yet touching loyalty to what was. Only in Natasha's case it won't cling to the past. Her husband will benefit by it — "

Father Vikenty interrupted him. "Yes, Johnnie. Very indeed. And so you will wait?"

There was a wistful query now in Johnnie's eyes. He slowly shook his head from side to side. "I don't know. That's where

I need your advice, sir. The day before yesterday I wouldn't have hesitated. I would have said yes. But now I just don't know. Have I — Have I the right to come between her and her father?"

Slowly Father Vikenty withdrew his eyes from Johnnie's face and looked at the icon of the Virgin. He understood the full meaning of the question; he knew now what Natasha had meant when she had said, "Oh, it's all so complicated with Johnnie"; he also knew that her mother had known it yesterday, but that her father had been kept in ignorance. And he listened to Johnnie, his eyes fixed on the dark face of the icon, dimly lit by the winking image lamps.

Johnnie was saying, "The way the old man carried on yesterday about Jews. You remember, of course. Well, earlier in the day, before you came, he had another similar outburst. I understood some of it. At least, I got the full impact of his prejudice. That's why I asked to see you. Later, after we had left you here at the church, Natasha told me everything, and I know now that he will never give his consent to our marriage. After all, I am part Jewish. And not in some obscure way either — through some distant grandmother or great-grandmother, or anything like that. No, through my father and my father's father. My grandfather changed his name from Stein to Stone, but that doesn't change my race. And I certainly don't intend to pass for anything that I am not."

Father Vikenty held his eyes on the icon. Never before, not since his mature days at least, had he been consciously anti-Semitic — he was far too good a Christian for that — but now under the gentle fixity of that gaze he took full cognizance of himself; and for a moment he sat torn in conflict. The idea of Natasha, the daughter of a long line of Tverskoys, *his* Natasha, marrying a Jew was shocking to him. Long forgotten, dormant prejudices — leftovers from his childhood and adolescence when ideas had been inculcated and absorbed, unanalyzed and undissected — awakened in him in sudden and furious protest. But years of striving for truth stood up against the archaic intruders. "Not in this church such thoughts, surely not: Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian,

Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all, and in all." He whispered to himself the words of the Apostle. How could his parishioners forget their differences and unite around his church if he, in its very heart, indulged in such sinful vanities? For what were prejudices after all but a form of vanity? His eyes were still on the icon, though he had lost sight of it for a moment. Now it returned to him, filling him with unendurable sadness. And between those dark peaceful eyes and his living gaze a short colloquy arose, speechless, yet resounding through his conscience in plain and clear words: Was not my son a Jew? . . . The Jews crucified him! . . . Yes. Once. But you, all of you, aren't you crucifying him daily? A hard lump formed in his throat: We do, so help us God! Poor miserable sinners, of whom I am chief! He wanted to fall on his knees and beg forgiveness, but a force greater than he made him stay where he was. Your neighbor's pains and troubles come first, was the silent command. Inner gates began to slowly swing apart, shedding light with which to bridge the already opening gulf between him and Johnnie. For Johnnie had seen his hesitation, had sensed its true nature, and a disappointment, inchoate yet well rooted, made itself felt in a slight quiver of his voice.

"It's a new and strange experience for me. My sister and I had never been exposed to such things. We were — Well, to put it vulgarly, accepted and received. Due to my mother, of course, and partly to my grandmother. My grandfather came to this country from Germany as Jacob Stein. He became Jacob Stone and made a pile of money on the Stock Exchange. Later he built up a still greater fortune in oil. Rather late in life he married my grandmother. She was Irish, of Protestant stock, the daughter of immigrants. As Millie Reilly she was born in the slums of New York. As Millicent Randolph she became a matinée idol in her day. My father was their only child. My mother, on the other hand, comes from a large and prominent clan. She was a Van Stralem of New York. The name doubtless means nothing to you, but it means a great deal to the Van Stralems. My parents had to elope to get married, but later there was a grand reconciliation with my mother's family, and Milncent — that's my sister, she

was called after my grandmother — Millicent and I were brought up in their midst. We never had any relatives on our father's side." He stopped short, looking sharply at Father Vikenty, his brown eyes suddenly hard. "But please don't think I'm telling you all this to make myself out less Jewish. I merely wanted to explain why it never occurred to me before that I might be unacceptable to Natasha's father from a racial point of view. But now that I know it, I'm asking myself, and I'm asking you, Father — should I give up Natasha? I know she loves me. I was never quite able to figure out why she carried on in such a queer way, but now I understand. It isn't easy for a girl to break with her father, and this old man has such a mental block I'm afraid the rupture would be final and complete. Natasha is running around in circles, hoping to fall in love with someone else, courting the idea in fact. And perhaps she's right. Perhaps she feels instinctively she couldn't cope with the situation. And perhaps I should fade out of the picture for her sake. I'll be going abroad soon, for two years. It won't take her long to forget me. Not at this stage."

It was characteristic of Johnnie to make no mention of his own feelings, as though not caring to have them weighed in the balance. And in this, Father Vikenty thought, lay the essence of Johnnie's unselfishness and devotion. Had he heard about her sudden interest in Boukashov? With his intuition he must have sensed something. Oh, Natasha! And yet Johnnie might be right. Perhaps she was afraid; perhaps she was running around in circles, trying to forget him. She had always been joyous, lighthearted, a little flighty at times, but never deliberately thoughtless or cruel. Now that he came to think of it, it was only in the last year, since she had known Johnnie, that this giddiness had come upon her, this plundering of her own emotions and those of others. And where would it carry her? Where would it end? Oh, Natasha! And aloud he said, "Ech, Johnnie, Johnnie. I know. It is harrrd. Prayers could help. Do you believe in God?"

Again he saw that lonely smile, only this time it held a touch of bitterness. For to Johnnie Father Vikenty's words had but one meaning — "Give her up." And the priest appeared to him now

as an old humbug, talking of prayers and God, while his verdict was based on prejudices like the old Prince's. And Johnnie's incipient contempt for Father Vikenty added to his natural skepticism a measure of derision which otherwise might not have been there: "Frankly speaking: no, sir. My parents are not religious people, and religion played no part in our upbringing. Officially they belong to the Episcopal Church. At least that's where they go for christenings and weddings. But such ceremonies to them are just a matter of good form, like seating a guest of honor on one's right, or pushing a revolving door for an old lady. The little I learned about God — mostly in chapel at prep school — didn't inspire me with confidence. Now that I've learned more about the world, the whole notion seems absurd. For what god, if he be omnipotent, could tolerate all that is going on — has been going on for ages? Could he, for instance, listen to a child asking, 'Where do we run to when A bombs start falling,' and not do something about it? No, sir! At least not the kind of god I would care to worship. And if all creation, as we see it, is a reflection of the Creator, then I'd say the Creator himself must be pretty much of a sadist, and I'd rather not think about him at all!"

Father Vikenty felt depressed. He had always seen his god not in sentient acts of folly, in violence, retaliation, ruthlessness, and greed, but in a pattern of secret prayers, friendly gestures, kindly impulses; and of such, he said to himself, there was still a plenitude in the world. His thoughts, addressed now to a youthful unembedded furrow on Johnnie's brow, ran on and on: If all you are able to see is a speck of salt, does that mean the cake isn't there and hasn't been sweetened? Man is forced to cling to specks, to tiny slices. In them alone he can find reality. The rest is beyond his comprehension. And there is, besides, man's freedom of choice. And if the choice be wrong, how could the results be good? But, as always, he couldn't put his thoughts into words, and he sat, tongue-tied, somewhat irked now by his ever present mutism. Yet in his anxiety to convey at least a particle of what he felt, he recalled three words Johnnie had said, and clung to them: "As we see it. Yes. As we see it. That, Johnnie, is wise worrrds which you say."

They had strayed far afield from the original subject of their conversation, and Johnnie brought it back now with abruptness. He stood up, his face flushed, speaking a little wildly, "I'm sorry to have taken up so much of your time, sir. I know now how you feel about Natasha and me. You feel I should give her up because I'm a Jew. And perhaps you're right. I'll think about it. But if I do give her up, it won't be because of what you have said or what her father might say, but because Natasha herself must have been imbued with such ideas since childhood, and they will always stand between us, and — and — And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go and wait for you in the car. You still want me to drop you at the Bourkevitches', don't you?"

But Father Vikenty shook his head and waved his hands in a flood of sudden comprehension. All that Johnnie had construed and misconstrued was made clear to him, as was the wound he had inflicted on a concealed but inflexible pride. He seized Johnnie by the sleeve, forcing him back into his chair, and a deep rumbling "No, no, no" came surging forth, quite independent of his will. "You no understand! You good man for Natasha. You wait one week, then grab and hold." He clenched his fists to show how firm the hold should be. "And Natasha, she stop playing cat and mouse — " But remembering the unpredictability of Natasha's nature, he added, after a wistful pause, "Maybe."

Johnnie was staring into vacancy now. "I misjudged you, Father — Forgive me — "

"Oh no! You no misjudge. You very good judge. Very indeed! But all okay between us. Un-im-paired!" Father Vikenty seemed to exult in the word which had come to him suddenly out of nowhere. And breaking into a big soft silent laugh, his shoulders and stomach all ashake, he sat there rejoicing at his own mental prowess, and at the good feeling within him, and at Johnnie's smile of gratitude.

16

EVERYWHERE at this time of the afternoon the traffic was heavy and congested. It took Johnnie over twenty minutes to get from the church to Columbia Heights, and the lighted clock on his dashboard showed five-thirty when he finally dropped Father Vikenty in darkness and drizzle at the front door of a four-story stone house.

Slowly, hurrying neither in body nor thought, Father Vikenty climbed the stairs to the second-floor apartment in which the Bourkevitches lived, his misgivings mounting with every step. "Oh, this Professor! God help me, if he has made up his mind. He can be as stubborn as a mule!"

For almost twenty years now, ever since Professor Bourkevitch had shaken off the dust of Nazi Germany and had settled in New York, he had known the man and had witnessed his unremitting energy: he lectured on Russian and German literature, wrote articles and books, edited a Russian literary journal, headed a Russian political anti-Communist group, which had been formed, he said, in order to advise and assist the American government in its fight against communism, but also, so it seemed to Father Vikenty, to denounce all other Russian anti-Communist organizations as heresies. For the Professor could not brook opposition. Russia had to be what he wanted her to be — a kind of Christian-socialist-federated Utopia, not unlike the Soviet Union in structure, but with Christianity, in a form acceptable to him, at the wheel instead of communism — and all dissenters were anathematized.

Like Prince Tverskoy, his love for Russia sometimes led him to extremes; but unlike the Prince, he had the will to endure, perhaps because the Russia he longed for had never existed except as a neo-paradise in his own mind. And the roots that linked him to his native country were less tangible than the Prince's. He had

never had any ties with the land. Although the grandson of a peasant, he had been severed from the peasant class even before he was born. His father had become a professor of philosophy at the Moscow University, his mother, the daughter of a fairly well-to-do merchant, had smoldered all her life in a hodge-podge of religious devotion, political discontent, and acquisitive urges, while he himself, city bred, no longer linked to the soil, his nose to the wind of radical ideas blowing from the West, had joined the revolutionary movement at an early age and had spent many months of his student years in prison. But he had ended up in a position of comparative importance and immunity as a leftist member of the douma. That he had intelligence and vision no one could deny, but his judgment was often impeded by the restricting scope of his ambitions — his thirst for recognition, his secret lust for power. To get the feel of it, he would on occasion impose upon himself and his wife and his followers a set of rules, often inconsistent and contradictory, but always immitigable so long as his taste for them lasted. And if for some obscure reason, Father Vikenty mused, the order of the day was nonattendance at the Concert-Ball, nothing on earth would make him change his mind.

But why forbode failure? Father Vikenty had reached the landing and was gazing reflectively at a big paneled door on which a bronze plaque proclaimed in Gothic letters the name of Artemy P. Bourkevitch. Yes, he said to himself, there was always a way to Artemy Bourkevitch's heart — the man's devotion to the Russian Church. "The Russian Orthodox Church," he had repeatedly said, "is an inheritance about which there can be no argument, no debate. It has always reflected, will always reflect, the best in us, and we must give it our full support and allegiance." For the Church of the Transfiguration he had a very special fondness, calling it "a Russian precious stone embellishing a new world." And encouraged by memories of this kind, Father Vikenty pressed the doorbell with sudden determination.

Mrs. Bourkevitch's round face, with its round nose and small, determined mouth, peered at him through the open door. "Ah, Batiushka, what a surprise!"

Traces of the bluestocking of bygone days could still be found

in the tight little bun at the back of her head, in the steel-rimmed spectacles and the solid crêpe-soled brown leather shoes of this busy housewife, cook, stenographer, secretary, proofreader, assistant editor, and disciple; a buxom little person, brisk and businesslike in appearance, but actually packed with dreams which she herself had skillfully interwoven with reality. And her round face, much younger looking than its sixty-four years, was contented and a little smug. For hadn't she rendered herself immune to all shocks and disillusionments? Any faults, any defects, any blemishes in the man she had set herself to serve, even occasional proofs of downright mediocrity, were instantly ascribed with a knowing nod and a complacent smile to the oddities and quirks of genius.

The smile of recognition had vanished from her face. She was looking with concern now at Father Vikenty, her frowns climbing up her smooth round forehead in thin, sparsely traced lines. She stepped closer to him and whispered, "The Professor isn't feeling too well today. Please don't importune him with troublesome matters."

Not a very promising beginning, thought Father Vikenty. The Professor's voice, speaking to some guests, reached him from the living room, full, rich, resonant, with overtones of laughter in it, as if everything he said was delightfully humorous. The voice sounded neither tired nor frayed. Every word fell upon Father Vikenty's ears clear and distinct as he followed his buxom little hostess down a corridor to the open living-room door: "Nonsense! If it weren't for a periphery of twitching nerves and muscles, especially of the face, how could you tell Colonel Koudrov was alive? He has a Torricellian vacuum here, my dear Lydia Petrovna. Yes, in his pumpkin, which that worthy has the temerity to call a head!" Colonel Koudrov, a man much admired by Ivan Ivanovitch and Mr. Owtch, was the active head of a rival anti-Communist organization claiming to have done considerable damage to the Bolsheviks. No, thought Father Vikenty, shaking his head and puffing out his lips in mild despondency. Not a very promising beginning.

At the Tverskoys' the family converged in the "little drawing

room." At the Bourkevitches' the dining room was the hub of the household; or rather, to be exact, the dining room had encroached upon the living room. The small square room beyond the wide glass-paneled doors, originally intended to serve as a dining room, had been converted into a sort of bank-office-archive-morgue, in which files, manuscripts, printer's proofs, newspaper clippings, and old magazines and journals lay in crowded confusion and disorder, strewn over a multitude of tables, shelves, and chairs. By comparison, the combined dining room-living room, which Father Vikenty now entered, seemed half empty. Here a big davenport stood with one end close to the wall, the other pulled out a few inches. Someone had retrieved a fallen object from behind it and had never bothered to push it back. In front of the davenport, but not quite in line with it, was a sizable dining table and a few chairs. A few more chairs stood at random throughout the room, neither backed against the wall nor drawn up to the table, in a kind of fortuitous disarray. Looking at them, Father Vikenty felt like issuing orders: Back into place, March! But then, everything in this room was out of line. Above the davenport four collossi of Russian literature — Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gogol, and Pushkin — hung in cracked wooden frames at diverging and converging angles, so that Dostoevsky seemed to be saying, This way; and Tolstoy seemed to be saying, That way; while Pushkin and Gogol bowed to each other in mutual recognition and esteem.

A small desk near a window completed the furnishings. But even this desk, and the chair in front of it, had been precipitately pushed aside in opposite directions; and the portable typewriter on the desk stood sideways, still holding a half-typed sheet of paper in its platen roller. The two guests seated at the table must have interrupted Mrs. Bourkevitch in the middle of her work.

Father Vikenty was surprised to find that one of the guests was Miss Katastrofoff, for usually at this hour the hard-working spinster was still in her warehouse closing up the accounts and inventories for the day. She was sitting now over a glass of tea in utter confusion, her long fleshy nose and bulbous eyes more doleful than ever after the blunder she had just committed in putting in a kind word for the unmentionable Colonel Koudrov. And the

critical beady eyes of the other guest — a slice of a man to whom the Professor's word was law — did not help her to regain her composure. But at the sight of Father Vikenty's prodigious figure a smile at once timid and hopeful stirred the melancholy folds of her thin mouth. "Oh, Batiushka, how clever of you," she exclaimed, hesitant as usual, "I mean how kind — No, how nice of you to remember my dear cousin's birthday." And addressing Mrs. Bourkevitch, not daring to look at the davenport where the Professor sat, she added, "He is always so thoughtful, our Father Vikenty!"

Father Vikenty had no idea this was Mrs. Bourkevitch's birthday, but he knew now why Miss Katastrofoff was there, why she had begged off from work, had perhaps forfeited a few hours' pay, in order to spend part of the afternoon with Mrs. Bourkevitch, who wasn't even a blood relative of hers. The fact that they had once had cousins in common was enough for Miss Katastrofoff. Like a wet leaf — the simile was Father Vikenty's — the lonely old maid clung in her secret pride of caste to anyone belonging to what she called her own milieu. For Mrs. Bourkevitch's family, like her own, had been closely connected to the just-next-to-the-top-level echelons of St. Petersburg officialdom.

In their youth they had often met in the home of their cousins, the revered Senator and his much quoted daughter, Marie Katastrofoff, maid-of-honor to the Empresses. They had mutually despised each other in those days. Lydia Katastrofoff had been the fluttering type, dreaming of balls and receptions, sighing over handsome guardsmen, gazing starry-eyed at passing personages of importance; while Lina Podgorsky, as Mrs. Bourkevitch was then known, had been a rebel, flaunting her disregard for fashions and conventions, and finally shocking her outraged family and friends by becoming a rural schoolteacher in a distant province. But the years had brought the two women together — Miss Katastrofoff in her loneliness, Mrs. Bourkevitch in a nascent sentimental attachment to the past. And the latter smiled reproachfully at her "cousin," as Father Vikenty proffered his congratulations. "You shouldn't have told him, Lydia."

"Nonsense, nonsense," cried the Professor. "He knew nothing whatsoever about it. He is pretending. Can't you see it, Lina?

Look at his face. It's like an open book. And I suspect that a very different matter has brought him here. Something we do not care to discuss. Do we, Karp?" The faithful adherent, thus appealed to, laughed thinly and extinguished his cigarette in an ash tray with little nervous dabs. "But make yourself at home, Batiushka," the Professor went on. "Have a glass of tea with lemon and rum in it. Yes, with lemon and rum. That'll help you get over the embarrassment you must be feeling after such a poor effort at deception."

He had stood up to shake hands with Father Vikenty; now he disappeared again up to his shoulders behind the table, the expression on his face half somnolent and half amused.

Madame Pishnik had called him a sleepy-looking salamander. Actually, there was little of the lizard about him except perhaps for his big square mouth and slightly flattened head, from which, however, as though to refute all propinquity to the reptile, a lofty forehead protruded in globular magnificence. Only when he was aroused by enthusiasm or righteous indignation were his listeners reminded of a legendary fiery salamander, for at such times he seemed to thrive on flames. The magnetism of his personality, the potency of his voice, the haughtiness of spirit that bloomed darkly in him, made everything he said sound forceful and cogent. And the compelling virility of the man, slicing a good decade and a half off his seventy years, appeared to carry within itself the seeds of turbulent immortality.

But just now there was neither turbulence nor fire in him. Pleased with his little gibe, he had subsided on the davenport, his eyes heavy lidded, his face sinking into repose as if ready to fall asleep in perfect satisfaction. He said, "Move over, Karp. Let Father Vikenty sit beside me."

Karp moved to the next chair with a quick dexterous swing of his lean hindquarters, sliding his glass of tea along the table to his new place. Like everything else he did, the movement was at once inconspicuous and determined; just as his outward subservience to the Professor had a touch of inner independence.

Father Vikenty sat down in the vacated chair. Mrs. Bourkevitch left the room to get him a glass of tea, and Miss Katastrofoff got up precipitously from her chair and ran after her, anxious,

Father Vikenty thought, to get away from the Professor for a few minutes and also perhaps to enquire of her friend how best to rehabilitate herself in his good graces.

"Well, Batiushka," said the Professor with a laugh, "for once Karp and I are going to listen to your confessions. Isn't that so, Karp?"

Karp laughed again, thinly, and lit another cigarette. Father Vikenty watched the bent, sinewy, tobacco-stained fingers that seemed to clutch the lighter with unnecessary ferocity. This scrawny little man was somewhat of a puzzle to him. He looked neither old nor young, neither dark nor fair, with only a heavily scooped underlip to distinguish him from thousands of others; yet somehow one always noticed him. He produced, although he was not emaciated, the effect of a body shrunken and collapsed; yet not bones, Father Vikenty guessed, but rather stringy muscles were sticking out under those loosely hanging clothes, for the man possessed the strongest pair of clawlike hands Father Vikenty had ever seen; their grip could be agonizing.

From Professor Bourkevitch he had learned that Karp's full name was Ardalion Vitalievitch Karpov, though hardly anyone bothered to remember it. He was thirty-six years old; single; Russian by birth and French by upbringing. During the war he had shown extraordinary courage and endurance in the French Resistance and in his subsequent mangling at the hands of the Nazi Gestapo. His origins were obscure and the information on them scanty. He was a well-educated man though, a brilliant and accomplished linguist, and for six years now he had been living in New York, tutoring students at the university in French, Russian, and German.

Father Vikenty tore his eyes away from those feral fingers and turned to the Professor, intending to speak to him about the Concert-Ball; but the latter waved him off. "No, no, I know what's coming. I can see it in your face. I don't want to hear about that Concert-Ball. Tell us instead about your exploits with Boukashov. I'm told you knocked the man down and held him pinned to the floor."

It didn't surprise Father Vikenty that the Professor should have heard of the incident. The grapevine among his parishioners was

active at all times, and there were, besides, several direct lines by which the news could have reached the Professor in no time at all. He saw the sudden interest in Karp's eyes. He saw the curious look Mrs. Bourkevitch gave him, as she came into the room and placed a glass of tea on the table, pushing a bowl of sugar and a bottle of rum closer to him. He saw Miss Katastrofoff hesitating in the doorway, glancing anxiously from him to the Professor. But sudden distress overcame her natural timidity. She made a dash for her former seat, exclaiming in a grief-stricken voice, "Ah, Batiushka! Yes! I too have heard about it." In spite of her secret love for him, his passion for wrestling was something her genteel soul could not endure. Sometimes in her dreams she would see herself opening her veins and slowly bleeding to death to make him forget that coarse and vulgar sport. It was a dream of delicious martyrdom, and she thought of it now as she clasped her hands together. "How could you, Batiushka, how could you, how could you?"

"And why not?" demanded the Professor, raising a withering eyebrow at her. "A mighty physique such as his must needs assert itself now and then. More power to him, more power! To tell the truth, I've been wanting to meet this Boukashov for some time now, but he's so damned elusive. So why don't you do it again, Batiushka? Only this time tie him up. Tie him up and bring him here to me. I could make good use of him."

Father Vikenty pretended to be shocked. "What are you saying, my dear Professor. I'm not a cowboy, and Boukashov is not a calf!" But the memory of that moment of witless triumph, when he had held Boukashov pinned to the floor, returned to him now, untrameled by the pangs of remorse he had experienced at the time, and his whole being yielded to it in a broad and happy smile. "Ech, Professor, Professor, don't tempt me. Don't tempt me. It's a sin. I swear to God, it's a sin!"

He broke into one of his soft silent laughs that shook his whole frame; and the Professor screwed up his nose and eyes and laughed boisterously; and Mrs. Bourkevitch laughed in accompaniment to her husband; and a grin of anticipation came into Karp's ungainly face. But Father Vikenty noticed that his levity had caused the most sensitive member of his Triumvirate to tremble with alarm

and indignation, and he took pity on her. Forcing his face back into a serious mold, he said to the Professor, "No. If I bring Boukashov and you together, I must find a more befitting way of doing it. Why don't you come to the Concert-Ball? He promised to be there."

"He did?"

The Professor's eyes wavered ever so slightly. It was a good sign, but the man was stubborn and proud. To give in all of a sudden, even for the sake of meeting Boukashov in whom he hoped to find a supporter, would be like losing face. And Father Vikenty thought of this as he said, coaxingly, "Dear friend, why are you so dead set against our concert-ball?"

Instantly the Professor's face darkened. "Because, my dear Father Vikenty, to my way of thinking, execrable performances on the stage — and execrable is the only epithet that comes to my mind when I think of the dreary, tedious shows I have had the misfortune to sit through at some of our Russian charity concerts — Well, as I said, execrable performances on the stage should not be indulged in for the purpose of raising funds for our church."

"But my Lord Sofrony approved of it."

"He must be a sadist at heart!"

Genuinely shocked this time, Father Vikenty threw up both his hands. "What are you saying? Have you no respect for the dignity of his office?"

For just a moment the Professor's face softened into a half smile. "I was joking. Forget it. But I'm ready to argue the point with him, if you are afraid to. We might yet be able to cancel this ridiculous affair."

The idea of canceling the Concert-Ball was preposterous. Father Vikenty had no intention of starting an endless quarrel, a feud perhaps, with his Triumvirate; and the thought of having any kind of argument with the Archbishop was, to say the least, disquieting at this point. Not until the results of Ivan Ivanovitch's denunciations became known, not until the punishment he both courted and dreaded had come his way, could he have forced himself to face the indignant prelate; nor did he want anyone else to do so on his behalf. He tried to guide the conversation into

other channels. "But surely," he said, "you want to support our church in its hour of need. The payment on that second mortgage must be met."

"I go to church to pray," the Professor began, using, oddly enough, the same words Prince Tverskoy had used the day before. "And I'll be glad to send you a small donation, within my means. But kindly spare me the company of those reactionary primitives, like that Prince Tverskoy of yours, whose one-dimensional minds are as flat as fingerprints."

"And don't let me get too close to them," Karp exclaimed suddenly, a touch of malice to his grin. "I might do this to them!" With that his hand shot out, fingers bent, and grabbed an imaginary nose, giving it a sharp and vicious twist.

The gesture was so realistic, so expressive of violence, that a gasp of horror escaped Miss Katastrofoff. But the Professor threw his head back and laughed. "Don't get so upset, my dear Lydia Petrovna. Karp is really quite tame. He just likes to scare poor innocents. Now behave yourself, Karp."

Karp's snigger and shrug could have passed for obedience or derision. He bent his face to his glass and sucked up a few loud sips of tea, while the Professor looked at Father Vikenty cannily. "Did you say Boukashov was going to be at this concert-ball?"

"He promised to come. And won't we look foolish in his eyes if our Honorary Vice-president," he bowed slightly in Mrs. Bourkevitch's direction, "were not present?"

"Nonsense," cried the Professor. "How would he know we weren't there? And don't spring such casuistry on me, Father Vikenty. You are not good at it." That familiar expression at once sleepy and amused spread over his face, drawing his eyelids down and raising the corners of his big square mouth. "No, Batiushka, the more I think of it, the less I like the idea of attending your concert-ball. Why should I hobnob with Prince Tverskoy, for instance, that abomination of reactionism? It is such men as he who made the revolution in Russia inevitable and were therefore responsible for bolshevism too. No, you can have him. I give him to you. Him and his whole clan, with their urge for apolegamic mating."

Father Vikenty had heard a door slam. He now heard hurried footsteps in the corridor and Natasha's short gay laugh. A moment later she appeared in the doorway with Yuri Bourkevitch pressing close behind her. "I don't know what apolegamic means," she cried. "But if it means what I think it does, I am all with you, Professor. I have made a vow, you know, never to marry a relative of mine." She gave Father Vikenty a mischievous wink that seemed to say, The sole reason I'm here, Batiushka darling, is to see what kind of miracle you can perform in this dragon's den.

She herself seemed perfectly at home in it. She kissed Mrs. Bourkevitch, wishing her a happy birthday; shook hands with Miss Katastrofoff, touched Karp's shoulder in passing by, saying, "How many languages have you taught today, Karp?" and perched herself on the arm of the davenport, looking down at the Professor with an air of I-know-you-bite-sir-but-you-wouldn't-bite-me, which young women, conscious of their charm, sometimes affect toward ticklish and explosive old gentlemen.

The Professor's grunt was noncommittal. It might have meant, Oh, there you are again, or, You are different, of course, or even, I'll bear up with this, if you don't keep it up too long. And then, as though on second thoughts, he said, "If you have come to talk me into going to that Concert-Ball, you are wasting your time."

Yuri had settled down at the table opposite Father Vikenty. There was about this short, squarely built young man, whose thoughtful, probing eyes were looking at the Professor from behind a pair of dark horn-rimmed spectacles as round as the face they adorned, an air at once of quiet, unpretentious firmness and of naïve, childlike trust. "Still being obstinate, Papa?" he asked with a smile.

The Professor leaned forward, keen yet restrained, attuning himself to the calm of his son's eyes. Karp fidgeted slightly, aware that with the appearance of the son his subservient influence over the father would wane. And Mrs. Bourkevitch, who until then had been gazing at Yuri with a kind of solid admiration, began suddenly to fuss. "Tea, Natasha? Rum? Or both? What can I offer you?"

"Oh, just a little rum, thank you, in a small vodka glass if you have one. And I think I'll take a slice of that wonderful black

bread. I simply can't resist it. It comes from the monastery, doesn't it?"

Mrs. Bourkevitch hurried out of the room, reappearing a moment later with two pony glasses, one of which she placed in front of Natasha, the other in front of her son. And Yuri, uncorking the bottle, filled the glasses with rum.

The Professor, meanwhile, was saying, "Not obstinate, Yuri, logical. I was telling Father Vikenty why I didn't want to waste a whole evening at his concert-ball."

"Oh, but Yuri has decided to go," Natasha exclaimed. She had buttered her slice of black bread, had bitten off a piece, and was chewing on it now. "Mmm, delicious!"

A dark shadow, in which pride and class consciousness and resentment were all wrapped together and carefully stored behind derision, crossed the Professor's face. "I'm not surprised," he said. "He can't resist you. But I, my dear, am too old to be that vulnerable."

And Karp said, "Why should the Professor waste a whole evening of his valuable time among sheep who bleat about the overthrow of bolshevism, without ever having felt the carving knife upon their hides?" The darkest kingdom of his soul seemed to stand revealed in these words, all the bitterness and contempt which he secretly felt for those who hadn't been through the mill of physical torture as he had.

Father Vikenty felt a surge of pity for the warped man. He wanted to say something comforting and constructive, but he saw Yuri's probing eyes fixed on Karp, measuring, analyzing, and yet trusting at the same time.

"Well, Karp," said Yuri, "none of us have gone through what you have, but some of us are trying to do our best all the same." Yuri had spent two years on government service in Germany, where he had worked together with Natasha's younger brother — hence his friendship with the Tverskoy family — and was hoping to be sent back to continue doing his share in the Cold War.

Karp laughed thinly — in derision or in contrition no one could tell — and took a few more loud sips out of his glass.

Yuri turned to his father. "Tell me, Papa, what are your real reasons?"

The Professor squared his shoulders. "First of all," he said, bending a finger, "dancing, and carousing, and above all an execrable concert program, are an insult to the church. Second of all, that church and its adjoining club have become a nest of reactionaries. Third of all, and with all due respect to Natasha, there will be people there I do not care to see."

"Oh, don't mind me," Natasha laughed. "I'm keeping a strict neutrality in this case. But I might as well tell you your feelings are fully reciprocated by my father. Isn't that so, Batiushka? So why don't you two grandly ignore each other while the rest of us have a good time?"

Yuri didn't give his father time to answer. "All of which," he said with a smile, "boils down to one thing — you just don't want to go."

"That's right. And what's more, I won't." And turning to Father Vikenty: "You could bring Boukashov here some time. Or I might perhaps go with you to see him."

At the mention of Boukashov's name Father Vikenty saw the color rising slowly to Natasha's cheeks. "But Boukashov promised to come to the Concert-Ball," she exclaimed, almost too casually.

"I know," said the Professor. "But the Concert-Ball is out. That's my final word."

Father Vikenty sighed to himself. Just because he couldn't play first fiddle this man refused to go. He saw that Karp was inhaling deeply of his cigarette, watching the escaping smoke through half-closed, satisfied eyes. Mrs. Bourkevitch seemed indifferent and unconcerned. Natasha and Yuri exchanged glances, amused and resigned. But Father Vikenty felt like a man in a dead-end alley, who still hoped to find a way out without having to retrace his steps. Now, he said to himself, something was bound to happen now; some door would surely open for the sake of his church.

And indeed, something quite unexpected and unforseen did happen: a noise, not of an opening door but of a stifled sob, that made everyone stare in amazement at Miss Katastrofoff. A large turbid tear had just left the corner of the spinster's eye. It rolled slowly, stopped, wavered, and hitting a tiny gully, plunged all the way down her long nose. Two more tears followed, and

still two more out of the other eye, bringing to Father Vikenty's mind Natasha's words — She's like a lot of drops.

But his attention was diverted to the Professor. He was breathing heavily, biting his lower lip as though he, too, were about to burst into tears. He passed his hand over his forehead, then waved it helplessly at Miss Katastrofoff.

"See how cruel you are?" Yuri said, secret laughter pressing behind his reproach. "You make women cry!"

Mrs. Bourkevitch's face had grown very red. "But, but, Lydia," she stammered. "Only a few minutes ago I was telling you how susceptible he was to tears — " She paused; opened her mouth, then closed it again; and with the full realization of Lydia's betrayal upon her, cried out in a voice that threatened to sever all ties of friendship, "Oh, this is unheard of, despicable, base!"

Under the impact of her wrath Miss Katastrofoff began to weep in earnest. The tears fell, copious and unchecked, first into her glass of tea, then into her open handbag, from which she fished out a pack of tickets and held them in her trembling hand.

The Professor jumped to his feet, leaning heavily with both fists on the table. "Stop it, stop it. I can't stand it. I'll leave the room!"

"I'll follow you — blub blub — I'll haunt you," Miss Katastrofoff sobbed. "I'll sit on your doorstep — until you promise — blub — to come to our concert-ball — "

"All right, all right, I promise."

He sank back onto the davenport, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. Mrs. Bourkevitch got up, pushing her chair back, and demonstratively left the room; and Yuri ran out after her, shutting the door behind them. To the weeping spinster that door must have closed on the last living link with her beloved past. She was weeping now over that severed link and over the sad spectacle she was making of herself; yet she didn't lose her head. Holding the tickets out at arm's length, she waved them slowly to and fro across the table, as close to the Professor's nose as she could get.

"Damn it all," he cried. "How many have you got there?"

"Twen — twenty-five."

"Give them to Karp. Karp, see that they are all sold."

Karp tried to protest, but the Professor silenced him. "Now that I've promised, it must be done." And in sudden mean retaliation he added, "The plainer the woman the more unbearable her tears!"

Natasha had been watching the whole scene in open amazement, her heart slowly awakening to Miss Katastrofoff's loneliness and despair. Now her innate kindness asserted itself, smothering her risibilities, crowding out all desire to laugh at the ridiculous situation. She ran across the room and put her arm impulsively round Miss Katastrofoff's shoulders. "Don't cry, dear Lydia Petrovna. And don't pay any attention to him. I think you have acted unselfishly, splendidly, and so does Batiushka. And now let us leave. Where can I take you?"

"To the church," wailed the shattered old maid.

Father Vikenty followed them to the door, but there he stopped and turned to the Professor. The Professor was laughing now. "Damn these women," he said. "But don't worry, Batiushka, I'll be there to see your *magnum opus*. I have promised and I never go back on my word. And don't you go back on yours. Remember you are going to introduce me to Boukashov."

Father Vikenty smiled somewhat absently and left, his mind, now that this mission was completed, turning to other matters, other duties, other troubles, intermittent cogitations on the Archbishop's impending censure of his folly traveling like fiery stitches around the edges of his thoughts.

17

IT WAS ON Wednesday, the day of Terenteeva's party, that the long awaited reprimand finally arrived. It came in the morning mail, a lengthy letter written in the Archbishop's arthritic hand in a style reminiscent of the most florid in old-time ecclesiastical epistolary art. The weighty voice of some Muscovite prelate of long ago seemed to resound in Father Vikenty's ears, filling him with awe. Seated in his big armchair, with Dragoon lying at his feet, he read the letter slowly, carefully, reverently, waiting with secret growing agitation for a thunderous condemnation of his assault on Mr. Owtch.

The letter started with a sign of the cross. Then came the salutation — "Beloved son of mine in Christ." But beyond that there was little love or charity in the letter, although Father Vikenty remained unaware of this. To him every harsh word in it was a well-deserved rebuke for his act of violence.

"It is with deep affliction," he read, "that I have heard again of your unseemly conduct. How long will you continue to vex me, O unhappy man, for the enlightenment of whose soul I daily pray the Lord in Heaven? Have you no regard at all for your priestly office? Was it for this that you were ordained and entrusted with the sacerdotal functions of our Holy Church? I warn you, my patience is wearing thin. And I call upon you now to ponder with tears of repentance and a trembling heart over the gravity of your offenses."

A list of the offenses, as revealed and denounced by Ivan Ivanovitch, followed immediately upon this formidable introduction, but so tortuously, tumidly worded that at times Father Vikenty had to pause and figure out what commonplace transgression had thus been grandiloquently labeled.

"Your mind, instead of dwelling on prayer and the guidance of human souls, is full of Neronian yearnings, still tempted, as in the days of your youth, by vulgar gladiatorial spectacles and shows." (That must be the wrestling match poster, he thought.)

"Furthermore, you have encouraged godless thoughts in others, and have condoned, nay even extolled, a deliberate insult to your church." (That, he said to himself, must be a reference to Kolia Strelkin. Ivan Ivanovitch must have laid it on thick.)

"Like a wild, untamed beast, you have attacked and felled a man—" "Here it comes," he murmured, suddenly weak with apprehension. To see his most evil deed put down in pen and ink by the prelate's shaky hand was almost more than he could bear. But a second glance at the interrupted sentence revealed that the Archbishop was referring to Boukashov, not Mr. Owtch: "Like a wild, untamed beast, you have attacked and felled a man who was a potential convert to our Holy Orthodox faith.

"You have indulged in abominable intemperance such as only the darkness of demoniac powers could have inspired. Don't you know, shameless and miserable man, it was for the rejoicing of the spirit, not for the promotion of wanton drunkenness, that our Saviour transformed water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee?"

"My sin, my great sin, och-och-och," groaned Father Vikenty, realizing for the first time that in his remorse over his act of violence he had forgotten his drunken bout. He crossed himself, resuming the reading in secret trepidation.

"You have transgressed all limits of propriety in your intimacies with your dog, pretending to adopt him, as though he were a being with a soul, and allowing him to share your bed. Not of bestiality do I accuse you here, but of a total loss of dignity under the vile influence of wine." (Och-och, was Father Vikenty's concomitant sigh.)

"Moreover, even in sober moments your mind has strayed into tenebrous shadows of aberration, for you have cast the sacred words of our Lord and Saviour before your dog, like pearls before swine."

Father Vikenty lowered the letter to his knee and looked at

Dragoon in hurt perplexity. "Why this all of a sudden? What has Dragoon done to him that he should compare him to a swine?"

Dragoon was sitting up now, head lowered, ears folded back, a pitiable look in his sorrowing eyes; he might have been begging for a word of comfort and reassurance. "There now, Dragoon-ushka, my dear, don't take it so to heart. By this comparison all pigs have been ennobled. I swear to God!"

But he hardly saw the contented swagger of Dragoon's backside. A fresh wave of remorse swept over him, engulfing all protest and rebellion. I should be writhing in shame, not criticizing my lord Sofrony, he almost cried out loud. For now, he thought, in the very next sentence, that greatest of his offenses would surely be mentioned. He closed his eyes to gather new courage, then plunged back into the letter, absorbing its last paragraph in one long, suspended breath.

"And so beware, my son, of the snares of the devil. Reflect in shame and contrition over your deviations from rectitude, trying to mend your benighted ways. For should a report of further transgressions reach my ears, it won't be in writing but in direct confrontation that I will be forced to lay upon you a severe penance. In the meantime, abiding in constant prayer for the enlightenment and salvation of your soul, I call the blessings of our merciful Lord and God Jesus Christ upon you, and remain, your spiritual father in Christ." Another sign of the cross followed, and then the signature: Archbishop Sofrony.

With unbelieving eyes he reread the final paragraph, then read the whole letter over in mounting dismay. There was nothing, not a single word in it, about his attack and abuse of Mr. Owtch. "Incredible," he muttered in consternation. And the letter slipped from his hand to the floor as he lapsed into a pondering silence.

Why, why, he kept asking himself, had Ivan Ivanovitch gone to such lengths of denunciation only to omit this one unpardonable offense? What strange quirk had prompted him to do so? Was it fear, cowardice, shame, sudden timidity, or just forgetfulness? Or was it some basic ultimate meanness in his nature?

The answer, sordid and ugly, came to him together with the

last question. It was as if he had always perceived what he now saw with disturbing clarity: the Judas in Ivan Ivanovitch, goading and betraying in order to behold a miracle of power and flaming glory, but grown puny and obscene through years of frustration, so that now, trapped within the narrow scope of his encystment, he had found in the priest's outburst of blind, ungovernable rage a munificence of wrath too precious to be disclosed.

Father Vikenty shuddered slightly, as if touched by something unclean. For once he felt neither pity nor compassion for the warped and stunted man, only mounting bitterness against the Archbishop for not seeing through Ivan Ivanovitch's machinations. How could a man be so lacking in intuition and perception, whose whole life had been spent in fasting and prayer? Was there no profit in such sanctity? Was no wisdom to be derived from years of monastic abstinence? The Archbishop's reproaches and animadversions seemed like so much idle twaddle to him now. And what good had they done, except to leave him where he was, bearing the weight of his one indubitable but undisclosed crime? His resentment swelled in surges, voiding all remorses and regrets. He picked up the letter and crumpled it in his fist. On his feet now, he paced up and down the room, crushing the letter into a tiny ball; while Dragoon, crouching in gleeful anticipation, kept his eyes on that ball of paper, his big mouth split into a bright demon of a grin.

With a retributive swing of his whole body the outraged man flung the ball of paper across the room. It fell near the desk. In one bound the dog was upon it, shaking and tearing it with low growls of joy. And the vindicated man watched. Not until the letter had been torn to shreds, and Dragoon had turned to him, seeking approval with a shy wag of his behind, did something give way in Father Vikenty. A groan escaped him. He reeled around, falling on his knees in front of the icons, and begged forgiveness in silent, frantic desperation for the folly of his insubordination, temerity, and pride; and for having led a poor dog astray.

But prayers notwithstanding, this was to be a day of evil charts. A gust of wind blew his big black hat off as he left the house, and he had to retrieve it from an ash can. Buses were either overcrowded or long in coming. No matter how he hurried, he

couldn't get anywhere on time. People grumbled and complained; and late that afternoon, in church, an infuriated Madame Pishnik confronted him with all the vehemence her ebullient nature was capable of when aroused.

"Father Vikenty," she cried, trying out of respect for the church to keep her voice under control but only succeeding in turning it into a series of hoarse croaks, "if you are not pleased with the way I am organizing the concert program, tell me so and I will leave the committee. But don't go sneaking behind my back, inviting all kinds of riffraff to participate! You know Professor Bourkevitch says our programs are too long. And Prince Tverskoy says they are dull. And other people have made other complaints. I'm doing my best to satisfy everybody, but how can I when you go and make arrangements without even consulting me? And I warn you, you'll never get Terenteeva to appear on the same program with some upstart of a D.P.!"

For just an instant Father Vikenty stood dumfounded. In the rush of duties and inner tribulations he had forgotten to tell her about Ketevana. He knew with what fierce jealousy Madame Pishnik guarded her fields of activity, and Ivan Ivanovitch, of course, had not missed his chance to set her on the warpath. "Oh my head," he cried, clamping his hand to his forehead. "My stupid empty head! I forgot, I swear to God! You know I'd never do anything like that behind your back. You know how I value your good taste and your organizing abilities!"

"Cut out the cajoleries, Father Vikenty. You aren't good at them. You've acted like a despot!"

When thoroughly aroused, she could be unreasonable. Father Vikenty cast desperate eyes about the place in the hopes of finding some help somewhere. He saw Ivan Ivanovitch tiptoeing from behind the iconostasis, trying to gain the club door unobserved.

"Ivan Ivanovitch," he called, "come here for a moment. Please."

Ivan Ivanovitch stopped, squared his shoulders, and thrust out a belligerent lower lip. And thus embattled in pugnacity, he solemnly approached the other two.

"You heard Ketevana sing. Now just tell Madame Pishnik what you thought of her voice."

Ivan Ivanovitch made a wry face. "Not bad."

"Not bad? What are you saying? Why, she has the voice of an angel!"

"Haven't you flown a bit too high, Father Vikenty? I hope never to hear anything so terrestrial in the other world."

In sudden anger Father Vikenty shot out his finger at him, threateningly. "You'll be lucky if you don't hear gnashing of teeth, Ivan Ivanovitch!"

Ivan Ivanovitch's eyes became secret, concealing a spark of obscene expectation. And it was in self-protection rather than with any intent to further provoke Father Vikenty that he puffed out his chest and exclaimed, "So! Now you have set yourself up as judge in place of the Almighty!"

Father Vikenty saw another black mark going down against his name in the Archbishop's records. He closed his eyes for a moment, saying to himself, This is a day specially designed to tax my patience, but I must not lose my temper. And now he saw Miss Katastrofoff wandering out of a recess at the far end of the church, which was the choir. She came toward him with so sour an expression on her thin face that he was reminded of one of Natasha's little sallies: "Poor thing! When God was handing out faces she was late and drew a lemon." He tried to mitigate it by adding, Yesterday's tears must have upset the poor woman's stomach; but even that seemed uncharitable somehow. And, he felt, the only thing left for him to do was to beg humbly for her assistance. "Lydia Petrovna, for heaven's sake help me. Tell Madame Pishnik I'm just an old blundering fool with no evil intentions."

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know," Miss Katastrofoff murmured. "How can I tell — ? The church warden of course is being tactless as usual, but it is hard on Madame Pishnik — No, I mean unpleasant — As my dear cousin, Marie Katastrofoff, used to say — You know, as maid-of-honor, she moved in the most exalted circles — Yes, and she always used to say, He who doesn't stand up for his rights is lost. Only of course she said it in French — "

"And I," cried Madame Pishnik in a fresh outburst of indignation, "am no worse than a maid-of-honor. Especially a dead one! And I tell you, Batiushka, if you meddle in my work and make arrangements behind my back, I'll quit! I'll leave everything —

the committee, the choir, the sisterhood — and I'll quit. Yes, I'll quit, I'll quit, I'll quit!" And the charging sweep of her hand with which she pushed into place that restless purple toque of hers seemed to express unshakable determination.

Her threats did not disturb Father Vikenty. He knew she would never quit. Her church work was too essential a part of her existence; it was, in fact, her breath of life. But he felt upset because she was upset, and agitated because he wanted Ketevana to appear on the concert program. To press the point, however, would have been unwise, and he recognized this in spite of his anxiety to get the matter settled as quickly as possible. And so he stood in silence, gazing at the three, a propitiating smile peering hopefully through his beard.

But the Triumvirate turned away, unappeased. The pattern of these unpredictable displays of solidarity was always the same, Madame Pishnik gravitating to the center to keep the two incompatibles from colliding. And thus they left, marching across the church, and out into the Club.

Father Vikenty heaved a deep sigh, puffing out his cheeks in perplexity. He was scratching the back of his head, asking himself what to do next, when the sound of an opening door behind him made him glance over his shoulder. Boukashov had just entered the church. In his excitement Father Vikenty wasn't even surprised to see him. It suddenly occurred to him that here was his answer coming right at him on two legs. "Boukashov, dear soul! Such a blessed apparition, I swear to God! You are my savior, dear man. You can save me from being eaten up alive."

Without noticing it he had slipped into a tone of friendly familiarity, addressing Boukashov by his last name, a fact which the other didn't seem to mind, although his smile remained, as ever, somewhat condescending. "Who is going to eat you up, Batiushka?"

"My Triumvirate of course. Who else? And one of them is so big and so angry she could swallow me without even masticating. But I forgot, you don't even know them — " Hurrying, stumbling a little over his words, he told him of the complications that had arisen in connection with Ketevana's apearance. "As you see," he

added, "it's my fault, all my fault, but if you could get Kolia and Ketevana to come to Terenteeva's birthday party tonight, say around ten or ten-thirty — I'll speak to her, I'll arrange it. She'll be delighted, I know — Wait, let me explain and you will understand — Madame Pishnik may act like a behemoth at times, but she has a heart of gold. A heart so sensitive, strings play harmonies in it at times. Yes. And if you get Ketevana to sing to us tonight, her heart will melt like butter in a frying pan. It will! And everything will be all right, and I will be forever your debtor."

Carried away by this extemporaneous scheme, he failed to note the sudden eagerness with which Boukashov acquiesced. "Why certainly. Where does this Terenteeva live?"

"Her real name is Olga Terentieva, you know. We just call her Terenteeva. It's a nickname. She has a big studio just off Central Park West. I'll give you the address. But wait! Let me arrange it while you are here. I'll be right back."

Father Vikenty all but ran across the church into a small cloakroom adjoining the choir, where he pounced on a telephone. And it was a matter of a few minutes before he had spoken to Terenteeva and was back with Boukashov, beaming, handing him the lady's address scribbled on a piece of paper. "There! Didn't I tell you? It's all settled. Terenteeva said, The more the merrier!"

But even as he said this, Boukashov's hurried nod, the smile of satisfaction imprisoned in his eyes, sobered the effervescence of Father Vikenty's outburst, and for the first time it occurred to him as strange that Boukashov should be there at all. What had brought him to church all of a sudden? Had he come in response to his invitation, in search of spiritual guidance, of consolation? And what could he possibly be thinking now of all this foolish excitement? "Ech, Boukashov, dear friend," he said, "I know. You must be asking yourself, Has this old priest gone mad? And what kind of a shepherd is he, who fears his own sheep? But then, you know, those three sometimes turn into rams. They butt!" And he broke into a low, embarrassed laugh.

That Boukashov felt embarrassed too was clear to see. His short, nervous laugh, almost a giggle, must have escaped him in an unguarded moment, for at the sound of it he drew himself up and

frowned. And assuming a tone of patronizing jocularity, he said, "As you see, my dear Father Vikenty, I took you at your word. I came to have a look at your church."

"Yes, yes, of course. Have a good look. Admire it." With a side sweep of his arm Father Vikenty seemed to offer his church to his guest. "Everything you see, yes, even the iconostasis with all those beautiful carvings and lovely icons, is the handiwork of our parishioners. The brush and carpentry of human faith, I call it. But come and see our memorial altar. I think it's the loveliest thing we've got."

He spoke with enthusiasm, seemingly absorbed in showing off his church, yet conscious all the time of a tension in Boukashov. A question seemed to be constantly forming itself on Boukashov's lips, only to be suppressed at every pause in Father Vikenty's voice. But now, as they stood in front of a small altar lit up by numerous image lamps hanging above it in rows, the question suddenly took shape. "Natasha? Does she come here often?"

On his guard now, Father Vikenty stared vacantly at the altar. It was as if he had known all along what was coming, had striven against it, and felt too weary to cope with it now that it had come. "Yes," he said listlessly. "She comes on Sundays whenever she can."

"And on weekdays too?"

"Sometimes. Yes. To see me."

"Even in the evening? Late in the evening?"

Father Vikenty frowned. Roused by sudden indignation at being cross-examined, and by a thread of hope that these questions were an indication of Natasha's refusal to see the man, he turned to Boukashov. "I don't keep notes of her visits to the church. Natasha, you know, believes in God and in the power of prayer." And having stressed his words, giving them all the weight he could, he now changed the subject. "But look at this altar. Isn't it beautiful? It was erected in memory of our dead. All those slain by the Bolsheviks, and those who perished in World War II. There is an image lamp for every one. And this one here," he added, pointing to a green image lamp, "was the last to be hung in memory of a boy killed in Korea. What a fine, intelligent boy,

so spirited, so full of life — Ech!" Father Vikenty sighed and crossed himself.

Boukashov was gazing pensively at the flickering lights behind their transparent colored receptacles. "We call it the Canopy of Sorrow," Father Vikenty explained. "A canopy of sorrowing love."

"Yes, sorrowing love," Boukashov said bitterly. "It seems to be the only one that lasts. I had a wife once, whom I loved. She perished during the siege of Leningrad. Yes, the dead remain faithful." He made as if to go, then stopped, saying abruptly, "Isn't Natasha going to Terenteeva's tonight?"

All too late Father Vikenty realized the blunder he had committed in asking for Boukashov's help. "Yes," he said, "she and a friend of hers are coming to fetch me at nine. We are all going together."

"A friend, eh — ?" Again Boukashov made as if to go, and again he stopped. "I know it is none of my business, Father Vikenty, but would you mind telling me who is this little Jew she has in tow?"

"Little Jew — ?" Father Vikenty had almost forgotten about Johnnie's origin. "Oh, Johnnie! He is a Christian though — " In name only, in name only, he said to himself, but you are not even that. And aloud again, "He is a nice, decent young man, kind and good."

A sneer of jealousy, a groan of injured pride and of outraged propriety, all seemed to simmer together, agglutinated, in Boukashov's next question: "And Natasha? Would you call her kind and good?"

It was the priest now who looked through Father Vikenty's eyes straight into Boukashov's, severe and stern. "She is kind, and she can be cruel, too. She can be good and she can be bad. She is human. But remember, she is protected. Natasha has a guardian angel."

Boukashov's smile was cynical. Do guardian angels participate in the passionate embraces and other sexual excitations of their wards? it seemed to ask, though he had the decency to pass it over in silence. He waved a deprecating hand. "When it comes to guardian angels I think it's time for me to leave."

Father Vikenty watched his receding back, saddened by the thought that Natasha must have discussed Johnnie with this man — it seemed like a betrayal somehow. But then, hadn't he betrayed Johnnie, too, by giving Boukashov an excuse to come to Terenteeva's party and perhaps ruin Johnnie's evening? Alarmed, he tried to repair the blunder as best he could. "Well," he said, "if you are scared of guardian angels, perhaps you better go. But do keep your promise and *send* Kolia and Ketevana to Terenteeva's tonight."

Boukashov had reached the door. He turned around now. There was irony in the folds of his mouth, but his eyes, sad and a little perplexed, were looking inward. "I can take a hint, Batiushka. Whether I follow it or not is another matter." The irony vanished, only the introspective eyes remained. "I want to thank you though for showing me your church. I like it. Who knows? I may be back in search of answers. But they must be logical and concrete. No guardian angels, please."

He was gone. And Father Vikenty was left alone, a little sad, a little jubilant, a little bewildered; afraid he had started something with which he lacked the wisdom to cope. Ech! But why look into the future guessing? When the time comes, with God's help — And tonight I've got to reason with Terenteeva. The last of my concert chores, thank God!

And on his way to the front hall of the club where Dragoon sat patiently guarding his coat and big black hat, he thought of the woman known as Terenteeva, with her dark eyes and somewhat ripe but still seductive charms, who, claiming in all seriousness to be the reincarnation of an ancient Egyptian courtesan, had set her life to a pattern of extravagance and eccentricities yet loved nothing better than a mild game of poker and a hot cup of tea.

18

IN TERENTEEVA'S STUDIO there was an abundance of thronelike armchairs, divans, love seats, ottomans, tabourets, and poufs, and a surprising shortage of plain ordinary chairs. Father Vikenty, disconcerted and embarrassed by the big pouf on which Terenteeva had forced him to sit, could count only seven chairs all of them gathered in one corner around two card-tables that stood joined together. But there may be more, he hopefully said to himself, I cannot see very well. Terenteeva is no respecter of bright lights.

Except for a brightly lit platform at one end of the studio, on which a grand piano stood with bared keys, all the electric bulbs in this vast room were trapped inside filigree boxes and alabaster bowls and huge conchs, with here and there a cunningly concealed spotlight focused on some favorite object: a Chinese porcelain figure of a fat old man with wobbly hands and head; an African fetish carved out of black ebony; a bust of the Egyptian queen Nefertiti; and a samovar (from Tula, Terenteeva was in the habit of explaining, the home of samovars and me); all of which left a stranger with the uncomfortable feeling of having unwittingly strayed into an auction room set in readiness for a secret fraternity initiation. And it was in rigid alarm, the acquiescent smile gone from her handsome face, that Sandra viewed it all from a love seat, doubtless enticed into coming to the party by Natasha's promise to provide her with Yuri Bourkevitch as an escort for it was Yuri who shared the love seat with her, gazing at the strange décor not in bewilderment but in a kind of perplexed and naïve amazement.

Most of the other guests — about thirty in all — were habitués. They chatted and laughed, unaffected by the somber theatricality of the setting. And with the exception of a rising starlet of tele-

vision — one of Terenteeva's former pupils -- and a young man she had brought with her, and Johnnie Stone, they were all Russians, connected with the stage and the arts; some of them young, others reluctantly reaching out to their sixth decade.

At first the older group kept to itself, laughing louder than the others and exchanging with their hostess occasional sallies dating as far back as the middle twenties, when at the age of sixteen Terenteeva had first joined Balieff's Chauve-Souris. And Terenteeva, with flashing gypsy eyes and the austere forehead of a nun (and a bright red rebozo, and bangles in her ears, and a large diamond cross sparkling against the black velvet bodice of her dress), circulated among her guests, urging them to drink, herself drinking very sparingly.

But pretty soon the champagne and the other drinks, of which there seemed to be a limitless supply, had the desired effect. The two groups merged, and the party grew boisterous, with hearty embraces, and kissing, and reminiscing, and loud loud laughter, the noisy participants keeping together, in the open as it were. Only the rising starlet of television and her boy friend, mistaking such extravagant effusions for something quite different, retired to the darkest ottoman at the farthest end of the studio, where they gave themselves up to purely tactile sensations.

And in the midst of it all Madame Pishnik sat enthroned in an armchair, beaming. She loved all artistes, as she always called them, regardless of sex or age. As far as she was concerned they could do no wrong; they just thrilled her, whose girlhood had been spent dreaming of the stage but who had wed the infantry instead. And she sat, holding on her knees a big leather handbag closer related to a knapsack than a reticule, her dress a shapeless mass of black satin cut out in a small square at the throat.

Father Vikenty had no doubt that Terenteeva had assigned her to that particular armchair — something between a Gothic episcopal see and a Persian throne — just as she had conducted him upon his arrival to the pouf, saying, "Sit here, Batiushka, it's a seat I prepared specially for you"; and had then promptly forgotten him to occupy herself for a while with Natasha and Johnnie. "Natashenka! What a beautiful young man. I'm so glad you brought

him. I simply must show him to Boris." And calling Boris Kirilenko (my lover — a second Caruso, was the way she usually explained him to strangers), she repeated several times, "Look, isn't he lovely? Isn't he beautiful?"

Boris's expression remained impenetrably bovine as he shook hands with Johnnie. And Johnnie, who hadn't understood a word, accepted all this attention in a kind of detached and amused perplexity.

"I think the Tenor liked him," was Terenteeva's comment when Boris had left them, his face, as he glanced back unsmiling over his shoulder, reminding Father Vikenty of a young bull — all square, with eyes wide apart and nostrils spreading.

"Natasha dear," Terenteeva then said, "you will take good care of yourself and your delicious young man, won't you? And don't let him come too close to me."

She laughed, and was gone to take care of other guests, while Natasha and Johnnie drifted off in the direction of the bar near the entrance door, chuckling and whispering to each other; and Father Vikenty and Madame Pishnik, like two obedient giants, remained where Terenteeva had put them.

Madame Pishnik was gazing at everyone with fondness and affection, but when her eyes finally met Father Vikenty's her face froze, making it quite clear he was still in disgrace. "You look very silly on that pouf, Batiushka. Like some bearded odalisque. Now is that proper?" He moved to a thronelike armchair next to hers and leaned toward her, smiling a little sheepishly; but she remained unyielding. "That's better," she said. "But remember, you've got to find your own way out of the mess you've made" — she was referring to Ketevana of course, who had not yet arrived — "Don't expect any help from me!" And this reminder of Ketevana and, by association, of Boukashov was like a pinprick. To forget it he concentrated his attention on Terenteeva's eccentric progress around the room.

She was standing in front of the bust of Queen Nefertiti now, explaining something to a young friend with the air of an enraptured devotee. Only snatches of what she was saying reached Father Vikenty: "Ah, so beautiful — In my previous incarnation — Oh,

just everything my body craved — But those were the days — No infamy attached to bodily urges — Jubilant nature as ordained by the gods — "

Father Vikenty hid a smile in his beard. He knew that under this loose talk lay an unshakable foundation of devoutness, not of an Oriental mystic as she would have liked people to believe, but of a simple Russian peasant, with its superstitions, and awe, and trust, and a lighted candle as a finial to every prayer.

She had moved closer to him now, standing beside a divan on which Natasha, Sandra, Johnnie, and Yuri sat bunched together. "Natashenka," she cried in mock ecstasy, turning sharply away from Johnnie, "don't let me look at him!" But seeing the silent reproof in Sandra's eyes, she frowned. "What are you so angry about, my dear? You've got a nice boy too." She stroked Yuri's head. "Not so beautiful perhaps, our little Yuri, but good, good, good. Lucky is she who gets him for a husband."

Laughing, Yuri drew his head into his shoulders and stuck his hands up in front of his face in helpless refutation, but the blood rose painfully, thickly to Sandra's cheeks. And realizing what she had done, Terenteeva swooped down onto the divan beside her in a sudden outburst of generosity and contrition. "Oh, but I like you, you know. You are aloof, and self-contained, and proud, and full of dignity. Women like you can reach heights of devotion and love unknown to us poor squanderers of emotion." She laughed, pointing to Natasha and herself. "And so, Natasha dear, let us drink to this beautiful cousin of yours."

The acquiescent smile returned to Sandra's lips, and Terenteeva took a sip from her glass, and then a sip from each of the other three glasses. "Now I know all your thoughts. And, Yuri darling, you are a very bad bartender. Quickly, go and refill these glasses!" And up she jumped, hurrying to corner Boris almost behind Father Vikenty's back.

"Any moment now," she said to those around her, "the Tenor will delight you with his voice. But you must sing for me, Boris. Remember, it's my birthday. If you sing for anyone else, I'll scratch your eyes out." And to those around her again, "You'll never know how passionate the Tenor is. Like a wild beast he'll pounce on

anything. Even the sponge in my bathroom isn't safe with him."

To the sound of Boris's loud and vacant laugh Father Vikenty grew pensive. It was one of Terenteeva's strangest quirks, this insistence on making Boris out as a "nest of secret vices," which was the expression she often used when referring to him; for actually Boris was a rather dull and tedious young man who knew which side his bread was buttered. But then everything in Terenteeva was topsy-turvy. She clung to him in secret devotion and fidelity, yet lived in constant fear that this love affair, even though he was twelve years her junior, might appear as commonplace and middle class.

And had she believed a word of what she said about him, she would have recoiled in horror. Father Vikenty remembered well the breaking up of her short-lived marriage to a wealthy American (a millionaire with a yacht, was the way she always spoke of him), and the outrage in her eyes when she had told him, "He wanted me to do such things! Oh, such things! Your hair would stand up on end, Batiushka, if I told you. The shameless animal! I almost strangled him with his own pajama tops and broke his bedside lamp on his head." She had obtained a divorce and a handsome financial settlement, the latter not without a certain amount of blackmail on her part — a fact of which Father Vikenty for all his clairvoyance had remained in ignorance until a year or so ago, when after her former husband's death she had confessed it, all but beating her chest in remorse: "Yes, I did, I did. And I have lived on that money. I opened my school of drama on that money. I have luxuriated in all my vagaries and whims on that money. And what did the poor man do after all? Nothing! Just indulged in a little vice now and then, which I, sinful, vain and stupid, pretend to extol!" Well, that was Terenteeva for you — superstition, generosity, outrage and remorse, and in between a lot of idle prattle.

And now she was standing on the lighted platform, silencing everyone with a theatrical sweep of her arm; and again Father Vikenty thought of the perversity of her nature. Terenteeva, Terenteeva, he chuckled to himself, such a sly woman, I swear to God! She must have arranged everything here so she could stand on that platform and be a one-man audience laughing at a crazy show.

And indeed, Terenteeva seemed to be scrutinizing them all, her air something between a dubious though amused spectator and a satisfied stage director. And after a well-calculated pause, she said with dramatic emphasis, "Dear friends, a woman's birthday rolls in but once a year."

Cries of "Hurrah" interrupted her, and glasses were raised, but she silenced them again. She even stamped her foot. "Shut up! I'm speaking now and I want no interruptions. A woman's birthday, I said, rolls in but once a year. As all of you know, Jack Benny is thirty-nine years old. A woman, therefore, has the privilege of being twenty-nine, and that is what I intend to be until I'm seventy, when I will all of a sudden become one hundred."

A ripple of laughter raced across the studio, which this time she did not interrupt. "But of what use," she finally went on, "is a birthday to one who makes such candid admissions? Well, my dears, I will tell you. This birthday means a lot to me. I have been looking forward to it, expecting to find in it enjoyment, gaiety, and relief for my tired soul! For you see, you have been invited here tonight to entertain me. Yes indeed! Some of you will do it right here on this little improvised stage, others need only be themselves, and I will look at them and laugh, and laugh, and laugh!"

A roar of laughter greeted these words. She waited smiling for it to die down, drawing her rebozo closer about her shoulders. And a look of mystery and mischief gradually crept into her face.

"Wait," she cried, her voice ringing now with secret titillations. "Before you start entertaining me, I'm going to tell you a little story about myself. I think it will bring hope to those among you who may still be waiting for their dearest wish to come true. Don't despair, my friends. Sometimes it takes all of those twenty-nine years to get a wish. Look at me for instance. Yes, look at me! As a small child I lived in Tula together with all the samovars. And like those samovars I felt faceless, unidentified, lost, waiting for an imperial palace to claim me. Yes, I lived with my grandparents in their sordid little house, to which my glamorous mother would occasionally swoop down from the limelights of the Moscow Art Theatre. And I, between those visits that were like golden

dreams to me, lived dreaming of my beautiful elegant mysterious mama, saying to myself, Some day I will be like you, Mama. I will live like you. Even better than you, damn it! And when I was eight, my mama took me with her to Moscow. I made a few appearances on the stage, and the future seemed to have opened up its welcoming arms to a new eaglet. But two years later the revolution came. My mama had a rich friend. He took us to the South, and later we escaped with him abroad. Ah, you all know what happened next — years of wanderings and hardships and frustrations. But I never lost hope. And look at me now!" The bangles in her ears shook and tinkled as she flung her arms apart, spreading out her rebozo and revealing a shapely bust with the diamond cross sparkling on it. "I resemble my mama now — I can show you photographs of her if you like — and I live as my mama never dreamed of living. So cheer up, my friends. You, too, may get your wish in twenty-nine years."

The studio rocked with applause and friendly boos, and Madame Pishnik almost burst a blood vessel laughing; but Father Vikenty sat in cogitative silence. Terenteeva's speech had affected him strangely. With it, he felt, she had plumbed the innermost recesses of her being, unwittingly baring herself in front of them all. He hardly heard the aria from Tosca which Boris was singing, a young woman accompanying him at the piano, his voice high, strong, clear, well trained, but totally lacking in warmth and feeling; and although he did hear Terenteeva whispering to Natasha behind his armchair, repeating Johnnie's name several times, he did not listen to what they were saying. To shake off the bemusing effect of this sudden unveiling he got up and tiptoed across the room to the bar.

And there he remained, a glass of champagne in his hand. Terenteeva came by, carrying a guitar, and stopped to admire Boris, who by this time was taking a bow, transformed from a straining to a placid young bull. "Ah how well he sings, doesn't he?"

Father Vikenty, embarrassed, looked down at his glass, incapable of telling a deliberate falsehood; and nettled by his silence, she suddenly flared up. "I know you don't like him, but you need not sulk about it, since neither he nor I are going to appear on your concert program."

"Terenteeva, my dear, it seems almost like treason that you should refuse to appear."

"Treason? You call it treason! But haven't you heard that I have sworn never again to breathe the same air as Princess Tverskoy? Don't you know what that woman said about me? She said that I said that Boris was a pederast!"

"Well, didn't you?"

"But that's different. I didn't believe it and she did!"

It was all so illogical and inconsistent, and a little incongruous too, that Father Vikenty broke into one of his soft silent laughs. She stared at him for a second, then gave way to a smile. "Batiushka, I've always said you were a comedian at heart. And you are, Batiushka, you are, you are!"

She waved her guitar at someone across the room and left him. And a moment later, to his surprise, Johnnie appeared on the platform and sat down, the guitar across his knee. His pleasant low voice, though small, went straight to one's heart — a relief after Boris's soulless outflows. He sang a Western song; and when he was through, Father Vikenty applauded louder than anyone else, shouting with gusto, "Bravo! Bravo! Fank you! Oh, Johnnie, you surprise me, I no expect. Bis! Bis! Bis!"

Johnnie smiled and struck a few chords on the guitar, breaking into another song. And this time his voice seemed just made to order for the sad but sedate cadences of "Green Sleeves."

Natasha was standing beside Father Vikenty, a faraway look in her eyes, hesitancy mingling in it with surrender. "Batiushka," she whispered at length, "when he sings, it seems to me that I love him. Everything seems so clear and easy when he sings. And yet it is so very hard to decide."

But even as she spoke, her expression changed. She had turned her head, and he saw her eyes flit past his shoulder to the door, arrested there, first in surprise, then in a kind of panic. And turning, he saw what she had seen: Ketevana standing in the doorway, Kolia, carrying a big black guitar case, and between them, Boukashov.

Boukashov stepped forward, his air more magisterial than ever. He took everything in at a glance; even a few things they hadn't noticed — Boris clandestinely pinching Terenteeva's buttocks while kissing her behind the ear, and the rising starlet of television

and her boy friend lost to the world in their dark corner. He strode up to Natasha and Father Vikenty. "What is this? A *lupanar!*"

The grandiloquent way in which he pronounced the Latin word and the pomposity of his indignation might have amused Father Vikenty had he not sensed the sharp retort on the tip of Natasha's tongue and seen visions of Boukashov stalking out of the place with Kolia and Ketevena obediently following behind him. And at a loss what to do to prevent such a calamity, he kept repeating, "Oh, what are you saying, my dear Boukashov, what are you saying?"

It was Terenteeva who saved the situation. She glided up to Boukashov and slipped her hand into his arm. "I know, I know, you don't have to tell me, this is the famous Boukashov himself. I am so glad to make your acquaintance, Monsieur Boukashov. Really glad. I have heard so much about you — as who hasn't? And what a delightful surprise to find a man of so polished and cultured an appearance, instead of the uncouthness we usually associate with Soviet officials. No wonder you left them — "

And all the time while speaking, she guided him across the room to one of the love seats, until her voice grew indistinct and his smile, that of an enchanted ego about to surrender, spread slowly over his big wide face.

Father Vikenty heaved a sigh of relief. Natasha had gone to greet Ketevana and Kolia, and he joined her. There was no time to be lost, he thought. Ketevana ought to break into song without delay, now that the little stage was once again empty. And Ketevana fell in with this suggestion, never too shy to sing but always too timid to converse with strangers.

Leaving Natasha and Kolia at the bar, he led her to the lighted platform. He saw Madame Pishnik leaning forward in her armchair, her eyes "gobbling up Ketevana's pretty face," as he put it to himself; and a humorous smile escaped him even before he let his big voice go booming through the studio: "Terenteeva, best of hostesses! And all of you, her dear guests! Here is my birthday present — the angelic voice of Ketevana Strelkin. Be very quiet now. Listen to it with your ears and your soul!"

He sat down on the piano stool, facing the studio, anxious to

see the effect Ketevana would produce on the audience; while Ketevana, sitting in the chair Johnnie had vacated, tuned her guitar. She looked so small and young and demure, one felt like patting her on the head and saying, "Good, good little thing." And for a moment he was seized by sudden apprehension, afraid that in his enthusiasm he had over estimated Ketevana's voice. But with the very first note, escaping clear and pure, all his fears vanished. Everyone in the room, even the rising starlet and her boy friend, sat up as though pricked into attention. And presently eyelids closed, absorbing and absorbed. And as on the day of the christening, the song died suddenly in mid-air, leaving the audience in a suspended hush.

Ketevana looked around in confusion and was about to get up and leave when Father Vikenty came to, loudly clapping his hands and shouting "Bis!" And the whole studio awakened to exclamations and cries and loud applause. And on this occasion Ketevana did not restrict herself to one song. She sang two more.

Madame Pishnik was the first to scramble onto the platform when Ketevana had finished her last song. Breathless, she precipitated herself towards the young woman. "What a voice! What a voice! And what songs! Father Vikenty, you mean, wicked man! Why did you keep this to yourself? Why didn't you tell me? I would have sat on her doorstep, begging her to take part in our concert." Clasping her hands together, her big leather bag swinging from her elbow, she turned to Ketevana again. "But you will, you will, won't you?" And when Ketevana had murmured her consent, she flung her arms out to Father Vikenty. "Batiushka, you are the greatest impresario that ever was!"

She played her little comedy well, and they both laughed in happy understanding, satisfied and forgiving. And Johnnie came up, saying, "I must bring my friend Jerry Wilson to hear Ketevana. He's quite a big shot in TV. I think he'll be wild about her."

Father Vikenty turned to Ketevana, intending to translate what Johnnie had said, but she had understood. And all her timidity melted away, and she looked at them, a great ray of hope, of secret dreams about to be fulfilled, shining in her eyes.

Pleased with himself, Father Vikenty wandered off in the direction of the bar, where Kolia stood brooding. But Terenteeva got to him first, engaging him in a conversation to which he seemed to respond in embarrassed monosyllables. Perhaps she called him *Monsieur* Strelkin, Father Vikenty thought, and that brought on a fit of shyness. For all his cockiness was gone, and he was moving awkwardly from one foot to the other, crumpling an imaginary hat in his hands, like a peasant lad who had suddenly found himself in the limelight of a great lady's benevolent attention.

Father Vikenty stopped a few feet away from them, his attention drawn now to Natasha and Boukashov. They were at the other end of the studio. He could not hear what they were saying, but Boukashov seemed very agitated. He gesticulated, pointing now and then at Johnnie who was still talking to Ketevana; while Natasha listened with that cold, haughty air she could assume at times. She didn't seem to say anything, yet he saw Boukashov open and close his mouth and then turn away with an angry but helpless jerk of the hand, his face as red as a beet. He then went straight up to Terenteeva and began to take his leave, abruptly, all the polish gone from his manner.

Father Vikenty hurried to Natasha's side. For a moment they stood looking into each other's eyes, and even before she had spoken he knew she was tormented by the ambivalence of her feelings for this man. "Everything was so nice and peaceful until he came," she said at length. "I thought I was happy. Then I became furious that he should dare make a scene of jealousy. And I thought he looked very common at the time. But now I'm sorry he's gone, and I feel like running after him. Oh, what is there in this man that moves me so?"

But she did not finish. A flustered smile flashed across her lips as Terenteeva joined them; and excusing herself, she went in search of Johnnie.

Terenteeva gazed at Natasha's tall graceful figure, her springy stride, then turned to Father Vikenty. "I've always said Natasha was an advanced young woman. She knows how to handle men. I take my hat off to her." She spoke as if in this lay a woman's

greatest achievement. "As for you, Batiushka, I congratulate you. You have no more worries. You have discovered a real talent, Madame Pishnik has forgiven you, and you need no longer fret that I won't be on your program." He tried to protest, but she refused to listen. "Let's not argue, please! With Ketevana on the program you won't miss me."

It was the second time she had mentioned the Concert-Ball. She was giving him an opening again, and he knew he must not let the opportunity slip by. He looked at her from under his eyebrows, ponderous and speculative. And deciding that a little venom would do no harm, he said brightly, "Ech, Terenteeva! I believe you are afraid she will outshine you!"

Her eyes flashed and her dark eyebrows moved from side to side in little undulating waves, creating a slight commotion on her austere forehead. "What are you talking about?" she cried. "Have you gone mad?"

But that was her only outburst. She quickly caught herself up. The smile that parted her lips was a trifle forced, and her eyes grew secret. "This is my birthday, Father Vikenty. I must not be crossed. Everyone must do what I want. And right now I want a game of poker. Madame Pishnik has been selected to play, and four others. And I want you to join us."

He straightened himself, his hands clasped behind his back, and looked at her down his nose. "On one condition only. If I win, you will appear on our concert program."

Terenteeva squared her shoulders, not so much in anger as in a kind of surprised unbelief. "Why, Father Vikenty, what a tone! What are you trying to prove, may I ask?"

"That you are afraid."

"Afraid? You must be mad!"

He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "If you are not afraid, Terenteeva, prove it. Accept my offer."

He knew that her foolhardy and somewhat brash nature could never let such a dare go unchallenged. Yet she tried to stall, pretending indifference. "I might have taken you up if we were going to play baccarat. But in poker how do you propose to do it?"

"What could be easier, my dear? The first round will count

for nothing. I mean we'll just play in the regular way. But after that, whenever you and I hold hands, we'll see which of us wins two hands out of three."

"But that way we might go on playing all night with no results!"

"Okay. No results — no change in plans."

"All right," she suddenly burst out, "I see you are a poor loser. Like the true comedian that you are you want to turn this concert-ball of yours into a little comedy of love and peacemaking, and just because I don't want to lend myself to it, you won't give in with grace. You want to put on a show. Very well then, have it your way. You know you always lose!" And, "Boris," she shouted across the room, no longer the enamored and amoral mistress but a shrewish wife, "bring me a cup of tea. And make it strong!"

The light of a large square fluorescent lamp suspended from the ceiling fell straight on the two joined card tables, creating a second bright blotch in the darkened studio; and the six selected by Terenteeva settled down with her at the tables, the two chief antagonists — Terenteeva and Father Vikenty — sitting opposite each other. At first the other guests paid little attention to them, knowing Terenteeva's passion for poker; but the rumor of what was really taking place drew them in twos and threes and fours to watch the game.

The first round had been played with the chips piling up in front of Terenteeva and Madame Pishnik when Father Vikenty suddenly grinned from ear to ear, emitting a loud "Ah!" There was one thing no one could accuse him of having — a poker face.

Terenteeva looked at him sharply. He threw in two chips. Madame Pishnik raised the bet, and Terenteeva raised it again, the others having dropped out. Father Vikenty raised Terenteeva, and Madame Pishnik threw her cards away, muttering, "Let them fight it out." But when Terenteeva raised the bet once more, Father Vikenty lost his nerve. "I'll call you," he cried.

Terenteeva showed three queens.

"No, no, not good enough! Three kings — three strong healthy wrestlers!" He laid them out on the table, pressing them down with his big thumb.

"Batiushka, you cheat," Terenteeva squealed at the very top of her voice.

"Oh, no, no, no! I acquired those three fine moujiks in the most legitimate manner." And with a sound of delight, part gurgle and part grunt, he stretched out his arms and scooped in his winnings.

After that, whenever Terenteeva and he held good hands, the other players by mutual silent consent dropped out of the game, anxious to have this contest over. And the next time it happened, Father Vikenty lost. Again he held three kings, but Terenteeva held a straight.

"Aye-aye-aye," he cried, holding his head in mock despair, "those accursed moujiks have betrayed me!" And Terenteeva laughed.

"Didn't I tell you! You always lose. The first time was just a teaser."

But a few minutes later the jubilant rattle in his throat, followed by a loud cry of "Hold everything now and beware," announced a magnificent hand. Terenteeva smiled derisively. It was clear that she too held good cards. And everyone, including Madame Pishnik and the other four players, leaned eagerly forward, holding their breath. The pot grew as Terenteeva and Father Vikenty kept raising each other, exclaiming with ever increasing intensity of tone, "Ten more . . . And another ten . . . And ten again" (they were playing at a dime limit), until Terenteeva said pityingly, "Enough! I don't want to rob innocent babes. I'll see you, Batiushka."

In total silence, too excited to utter a word, Father Vikenty laid out four kings on the table. Terenteeva stared at them incredulously, then flung away her cards. "Damn it all! And I had four tens! There must be something queer about you, Father Vikenty, the way those kings crawl all over you tonight."

But Father Vikenty wasn't listening. Leaning forward and thumping his fists on the table, his teeth glistening white through

his beard and his nose red with glee and champagne, he shouted, "We've won her back, we've won her back! Terenteeva is ours again! Ha! Ha! Ha!" And he roared with laughter right into her disconcerted face.

Madame Pishnik jumped to her feet and kissed him on the top of his head; then rushed around the table and hugged Terenteeva. And in the silence that followed, Father Vikenty heard Johnnie's low voice saying to Natasha, "If anyone could ever convert me to religion, it would be this man."

It was the kind of praise that embarrassed Father Vikenty more than anything, making him feel ashamed, so convinced was he that as a priest he was a failure. He sat back in his chair, confused, his whole face a bright red now. But somewhere to his right he heard Sandra whispering to Yuri, "Really! What kind of priest is he? Shouts, drinks, gambles. I'm shocked!" And he felt better. He leaned forward again, smiling at Terenteeva.

She was standing up now, laughing, all irritation and anger seemingly gone. "Listen to me," she cried. "Father Vikenty has won, and now we must all play this comedy according to his directions. But not without one curtain directed by me! Oh yes, I insist on it. This first act must end the way I want it to. And since I must now appear on his concert program, I command that each one of you here buy two tickets. Promise?"

"No need to promise," cried Madame Pishnik. "What is said is done."

The ladies of the Triumvirate seemed always ready for any eventuality, for with one sweep of her hand Madame Pishnik extracted from her bag a pack of tickets twice as thick as the one Miss Katastrofoff had produced two days before; and with it she went around the room, handing out two tickets to each guest, collecting the money or, whenever someone was short of cash, putting down the debtor's name on a slip of paper.

Terenteeva watched her in amusement and dismay. And when Madame Pishnik sat down again, heaving a sigh of blissful satisfaction, she said, "But that isn't all. Oh, no! Father Vikenty won, don't forget — a thing that seldom happens to him. And so, to bring success to his concert-ball — By the way, when is it?"

"Friday, February sixth, at nine o'clock," Father Vikenty and Madame Pishnik replied in chorus.

"Friday, February sixth, at nine o'clock," she repeated. "Very well. And so to bring success to the Concert-Ball on Friday, February sixth, at nine o'clock, and to glorify our dear Batiushka, we must now toss him in the air!"

There was a rush of feet in Father Vikenty's direction. The urge for extravagant, boisterous rejoicing, that lies entrenched in most Russians, let alone the secret, half-conscious desire to see the man who is being honored fly supine through the air, helpless and ridiculous, took possession of Terenteeva's guests. Numerous hands grabbed Father Vikenty at the elbows and behind the knees, but he dug his heels into the floor, making himself as heavy as he could.

"Terenteeva," he protested, "this is unseemly!"

Instantly Madame Pishnik was at his side. With fierce determination, all the more formidable for its silence, she hurled away the assailants one by one. And when they were all scattered, laughing and giggling and pretending to complain, she placed herself in front of Father Vikenty, protecting him like a huge buffer state. "Terenteeva, you mad thing! Have you lost your head? Father Vikenty is a priest, you can't toss him in the air!"

Terenteeva shrugged and took a few sips out of her cup of tea. She then smiled indifferently and drew her rebozo closer to herself. If anyone knew how to time a dramatic effect, it was she. "Well," she drawled at length, "I dare say you are right. But it has to be done. Otherwise the Concert-Ball will be a flop and Father Vikenty will remain unglorified. Someone else must be tossed instead. Batiushka! Whom do you appoint? Choose your substitute."

And before he even knew what it was all about, Johnnie was flying through the air to the greater glory of Father Vikenty and the success of the Concert-Ball.

19

AND FINALLY the big day came. Father Vikenty looked at the calendar on his desk. There it was: Friday, February 6, 1953—the day of great expectations. Nothing could dim his high spirits that morning, not even Princess Tverskoy's recent complaint that Natasha had been seeing too much of Boukashov. He chased the irksome thought away. And like one excited schoolboy to another, he exclaimed, "Yes, Dragoonushka, tonight is the Concert-Ball. Terentee va may call it a comedy of love and peacemaking, but that doesn't disturb us, does it? This is the real thing, Dragoon. Just what we've been hoping and praying for. Yes, my dear. And I promise you won't miss it. You'll sit in the club vestibule with my coat and hat and see them all coming in and going out."

But Dragoon wasn't interested. He poked Father Vikenty with his paw several times, glancing hopefully at the door. He might as well have said it out loud: "Take me round the block. It's more pressing."

All that day Father Vikenty walked in a kind of subdued elation. That afternoon he prayed in his room for the success of the party; the gathering of his flock, as he secretly called it, brought together by the hand of God to forget all differences and discover the joys of brotherly love and solidarity. Let them have their private likes and dislikes, but in and around his church, let them dwell in peace and understanding. And his rosy dreams, not for himself but for the church he loved, brought tears to his eyes. Their fulfillment seemed within reach.

Shortly before nine, having left Dragoon tied to a hatrack in the front hall of the Club, he retired to the small cloakroom adjoining the choir to put on what he called his gala robes. And when a few minutes later he entered the big community hall, in which

rows of portable chairs had been placed facing an open stage, Miss Katastrofoff's eyes grew a little more bulbous with undisguised admiration as she took in his festive apparel — the long cassock of rich heavy black cloth, its full sleeves doubled with emerald-green silk, and the pectoral cross of gold studded with semi-precious stones around his neck — gifts from his parishioners on his twenty-fifth anniversary as rector of the Church of the Transfiguration. And suddenly she felt deliciously insignificant, modest and mousy in her dress of gray crêpe, V-shaped at the throat and edged with wine-colored velvet. And her heart gave a leap and sank, full of weakness and readiness for that which, alas! would never come. Madame Pishnik, watching her from behind the stage, described the expression on her face as "the ecstasies of a modest pea hen." "Not for you, Lydia Katastrofoff," she said with a touch of ribaldry à la Pishnik, as she went about her business tending to the arriving artistes, "not for you does the splendor of his plumage unfold."

Miss Katastrofoff, meanwhile, had led him to the front row and was saying in her hesitant way, "I really don't know — I feel rather distressed about it — I mean about the way Madame Pishnik told you to seat the Bourkevitches and the Tverskoys. After all, our dear and kind Madame Pishnik was born somewhere on the Volga and then trundled through the infantry — True, her husband ended up as a general, but she couldn't really know such things — My uncle, Senator Katastrofoff, on the other hand was always a great stickler in matters of seating, and naturally my cousin, Marie, had learned at court all matters of etiquette to perfection — And so I do know a little more about it than Madame Pishnik, Batiushka — "

Father Vikenty had no idea what she was driving at, but he was anxious that everything should go off smoothly, without a hitch, and so he lent an attentive ear, leaning slightly forward, "Tell me, Lydia Petrovna, tell me what's on your mind."

"Well, Batiushka, you of course must sit here in the center of the front row, which is your rightful place. But Madame Pishnik told you to put Princess Tverskoy on your right and Professor Bourkevitch next to her, and Madame Bourkevitch on your left

with Prince Tverskoy next to her, and that is wrong! This isn't a dinner party, this is a concert. Oh, don't misunderstand me, it is correct for the Princess, as our honorary president, to be on your right, and for Madame Bourkevitch, as our honorary vice-president, to be on your left, but they should sit with their husbands as though they were in a theatre."

"And so it shall be," he cried. "Let it never be said that we are an ignorant lot so long as we've got you to advise us!"

Miss Katastrofoff blushed with delight, while Father Vikenty from his point of vantage scanned the big hall. At one end he saw Ivan Ivanovitch, who with an air of infinite importance was instructing a dozen young men how to carry out the chairs after the concert was over, and where to stack them, and how to bring in the supper tables, and where to place them so as to leave ample space near the stage for dancing. Ivan Ivanovitch was in his element issuing orders, and with him bossing that crew nothing could go wrong. Father Vikenty's eyes then wandered to the entrance, where four young girls, dressed in Russian peasant costumes, stood prepared to pounce on every newcomer, pressing upon him with unrelenting smiles a hand-painted program in exchange for a quarter. They look pretty and they are all set, he said to himself, the programs will sell. And finally his eyes came to rest on a table near the entrance, at which Miss Klüpfel — Margarita Petrovna Klüpfel — sat in readiness to check the tickets. Yes, he thought, and that, too, was well taken care of.

Miss Klüpfel was the lady who during divine services stood behind the desk in the church, selling candles (and little icons and crosses and other small holy objects), and also counting the money collected in the plates. It was of her that Miss Katatastrofoff had once said with a condescension all the more incurable for the hesitancy and timidity with which it was expressed, "How perfectly — No, I mean how marvelously — Oh, isn't it wonderful how everyone seems to find his rightful place in our blessed church. Miss Klüpfel's father, you know, was an excise official."

Meticulous and unsmiling, her rimless glasses firmly embedded in her angular nose, Miss Klüpfel was now checking the tickets of some early arrivals; and the blue velvet band around her neck,

with a turquoise heart hanging from it, and the little blue bows in her hair did nothing to soften the heavy bony structure of her face. Nor were they the tokens of a frivolous and volatile nature, for nothing could distract this fifty-year-old spinster from whatever she happened to be doing at the time. Miss Klüpfel possessed an undeviating, one-track mind.

"Just try and crawl by her without paying your dues," Father Vikenty said with a chuckle.

"Ah — " sighed Miss Katastrofoff. "It's in her blood."

A loud creak made them turn around. Madame Pishnik had stepped onto the stage. In her shapeless black dress — the same she had worn at Terenteeva's, only with a bunch of rather frayed artificial violets pinned now where the waistline should have been — she might almost have competed in size and black glossiness with the grand piano that stood at one end of the stage and which she had come to open and dust. "Why are you idling, Batiushka?" she said. "You should be out there, saying a few kind words to the arriving guests." And having ministered to the piano, she retired backstage again with another ominous creak of the boards.

One of the four girls in Russian costume skipped up to Father Vikenty, bouncing and coy, and handed him a program. "Miss Klüpfel says this one is for you, Batiushka."

The hand-painted covers of these programs were the work of Miss Klüpfel, and the one he now held had an ecclesiastical censer, a thurible, drawn on it, from which the incense rose to the top of the page to form in stray whiffs the words CONCERT-BALL, with little birds (Why little birds? he asked himself but never found the answer.) perched either inside or on top of every letter. The censer, he realized, was at once an expression of Miss Klüpfel's ardent prayers for the success of the party and a pun on his last name — Kadilov; *kadilo* meaning thurible in Russian.

"Oh, thank you! Beautiful, most appropriate," he exclaimed; and catching sight of Johnnie in the doorway, hurried forward to meet him.

Johnnie and his friends, ignorant of the Russian habit of starting such performances at least half an hour late, had arrived on

time. "This, Father, is my sister, Millicent," he said; and a delightful female edition of Johnnie smiled and shook hands with Father Vikenty; "And this, sir, is my brother-in-law, Ogden Post." Pallid looking, Father Vikenty thought, but probably very efficient. He was next introduced to a blonde, whose name he did not catch but who, judging by her tense smile, was prepared for any eventualities, not the least of which was Father Vikenty himself in his gorgeous apparel; and finally to Johnnie's friend, Jerry Wilson, a young man obviously more interested in producing TV shows than in getting a haircut.

"Oh, Jerry," Father Vikenty exclaimed, remembering what Johnnie had said about him at Terenteeva's party. "Good! You come here tonight, you will hear and see much which will surprise!" And noticing that Johnnie had just bought five programs, he felt it incumbent upon him to give the assiduous artist a boost. "Each one, Johnnie, was made by Miss Klüpfel there. She sit up all night to paint." He pointed to the lady, but she was far too intent on her work to hear him. "Very busy," he explained. "But look at mine. Miss Klüpfel she make it for me. Special! See, here is thurible" — he pronounced it "tewreeble" — "and my family name is Kadilov. In Russian it means 'belonging to a tewreeble' or 'son of a tewreeble.' Yes!" A remark that caused Johnnie and his friends to chuckle long after Father Vikenty had shown them to their seats in the second row center.

But Father Vikenty, for all his joy and excitement, had felt a pang of anxiety. Why hadn't Natasha come with Johnnie? Was she with Boukashov? His fears however were dispelled the moment he caught sight of Kolia and Boukashov, standing near the wall. They were glancing around, Kolia gloomy, and Boukashov, although he was putting on his grandest air, a little nervous at finding himself for the first time since his escape in such a large gathering of Russians. Perhaps he is afraid some Bolsheviks may have infiltrated themselves into our midst to kidnap him, Father Vikenty thought, as he hurried toward them. "Boukashov! Kolia! So glad to see you. Has our Ketevana been safely handed over to Madame Pishnik? Good! Come, I have reserved two special seats for you." He led them to the front row. It was all care-

fully planned in his head. He was going to place Boukashov next to Professor Bourkevitch. That way, he said to himself, I will have kept my promise.

The hall was filling up rapidly, humming now with voices. And the Tverskoy clan made its apearance in an impressive procession, headed by the Prince and the Princess and Aunt Ella. Even Miss Klüpfel broke into a somewhat fangy smile and rose halfway from her chair to shake hands with the Princess, whose crown of white hair and tall stately figure, slendered by a long dark evening gown, made Father Vikenty feel like bursting into song; not just any kind of song, but some special hymn of praise and homage, so completely did she conform to his idea of what a princess should be. For there was about this woman a nobility of carriage that blended naturally, easily, unassumingly with a simple outgoing warmth. And her charm was made all the more apparent by the presence of Aunt Ella at her side, that stiff and poky imitation of her sister. The Prince, who had sprained his ankle a few days before, walked with a slight limp, and the cane he was leaning on gave him an air not of decrepitude but of weighty dignity.

They were followed by a bevy of relations and friends; with Sandra among them, dark, handsome, a little exotic even in a flame-colored dress, and Natasha with a reflection of gold in her light brown hair and a shimmer of gold in her dress, made of one of those modern fabrics the color and substance of which was hard to define. The devil only knows what it is but it's perfect, Father Vikenty thought. And he wondered, as he escorted the elder Tverskoys to their seats, where Natasha would go. He felt a little reassured when he found her sitting between Johnnie's brother-in-law and Jerry Wilson. But was there a secret purpose to this? For Boukashov was now seated almost in front of her. Bah—why should I worry? What is to be is to be, and I'm carrying a sack full of happiness tonight. Now if only the Bourkevitches would make an appearance we could start things going. The Professor has probably timed it so as to get here last. Such a character, I swear to God!

And indeed, the Bourkevitches were among the last arrivals.

They, too, came with a group of followers and friends, but their entrance was not as impressive as that of the Tverskoys. First Karp came in, his movements jerky as usual, and thrust a bunch of tickets right under Miss Klüpfel's nose, making the old maid jump in surprise. Then the Professor appeared in the doorway, nervously fumbling at his collar; and Mrs. Bourkevitch, plump and dowdy in an old-fashioned evening gown but displaying a pair of unexpectedly well-shaped ankles now that high heels had replaced her thick crêpe soles, adroitly avoided Miss Katastrofoff's little forward plunge by hurrying to shake hands with Father Vikenty. And Father Vikenty noticed with amusement that Yuri, after glancing at the audience, took a straight and undeviating line in Sandra's direction, a look of surprised admiration on his round face as though he were seeing her for the first time. Ech-ech! The trap is closing, he chuckled to himself.

The meeting between the Professor and the Prince, which Father Vikenty had secretly dreaded, was, to put it mildly, totally lacking in cordiality. The Prince, making a display of his injured foot, excused himself from getting up, and the Professor, ignoring him, bowed stiffly to the Princess without shaking hands. And the moment Father Vikenty introduced him to Boukashov, he sat down with his back half turned to the Tverskoys, engaging Boukashov in a long conversation; while the Prince, leaning closer to Aunt Ella who sat on his right, said something in French, obviously disparaging to the Professor but incomprehensible to Father Vikenty. Well, that's over with. At least they are sitting together in the same row, Father Vikenty consoled himself. And it was a real comfort to him to find the Princess and Mrs. Bourkevitch amiably discussing their sons and the life the two young men had led in Germany.

But not until the bell had rung, announcing the beginning of the concert program, did Father Vikenty feel entirely at his ease again. He didn't even mind the Professor's complaint, "Oh, God! the agony commences!" And in the expectant hush that fell upon the audience, he glanced over his shoulder at Johnnie and Natasha and their friends, exclaiming brightly, "Now we have fun!"

But his idea of fun, as Johnnie and his friends soon discovered, was not the same as theirs; and only his loud, wholehearted enjoyment of the show, and his kindly efforts at sharing it with them, made this first part of the program seem at all bearable. He looked at the program, exclaiming in English for their benefit, "Choudov's Don Cossacks—seex beeg strong voices"; and after the six stalwart men in Cossack uniforms had given a rendition of "Stenka Razin" and "The Volga Boatman" and other Russian songs, he shouted, "Bravo, bravo! Bis! Bis! Bis!" applauding until the palms of his hands began to smart.

And it was the same with each subsequent number, commencing with a balalaika player named Andrey Kugelman and ending with Popov the Magician. Popov the Magician was by far the best. Some of his card tricks were quite spectacular and sensational, leaving Father Vikenty gasping. And when the whole pack of cards had been flung across the stage, the one needed card remaining stuck against the wall, he held on to his chair in his excitement, as he shouted, "*Vot choodo!* Meeracle!"

He loudly clamored for more, and the audience clamored with him. And even when Boris Kirilenko — a frightful letdown after Popov the Magician — had bellowed out a few arias from Italian and Russian operas, Father Vikenty made a shameful compromise with his conscience and shouted, "Bravo, bis," louder than ever; so that, with endless encores to every number, almost an hour and a half dragged by before the first part of the concert program came to an end.

The interval proved to be endless too, though not quite as tedious as the performance. Those who went out into the front hall to smoke made a fuss over Dragoon and in return were entertained by him. He wriggled his backside, grinning, jumping and straining at his leash; and Father Vikenty, passing by, exclaimed, "Ech, Dragoonushka, the best entertainer of them all. I told you you'd enjoy it, didn't I?"

Father Vikenty seemed omnipresent, moving from group to group, in and out of the hall, here and there and everywhere, listening and watching. He saw Natasha speaking earnestly to Johnnie, and Johnnie listening to her with an air at once sad

and determined. He saw Sandra's anxious eyes directed at Yuri, who, oblivious of her once again, was gazing wistfully at Natasha. He saw the Prince holding forth to an exclusive group; and Mrs. Bourkevitch answering Miss Katastrofoff in dry and unforgiving monosyllables; and the Princess listening in polite boredom to a gesticulative diatribe by Colonel Koudrov, Professor Bourkevitch's hated rival; and the Professor buttonholing Boukashov with one hand and pointing to Koudrov with the other, while Boukashov shook his head in vigorous denial. And sensing that everything was not as harmonious as it might be, Father Vikenty was about to go backstage and ask how much longer the interval would last, when a loud ringing of bells heralded the second half of the program.

Back in his seat, he noticed that the Professor and Boukashov were no longer on friendly terms. Boukashov sat staring into space, a sulky fold to his mouth; while the Professor, tapping his globular forehead with his finger, whispered to Mrs. Bourkevitch, "Just fancy, Lina. He doesn't see any difference between Koudrov and me. That's what is called being blinded by the Soviets!"

But Father Vikenty was too steeped in optimism to be alarmed. This concert-ball was under higher protection, and all misunderstandings and discontent would therefore be ironed out by a hand mightier than his. Behind him he heard Natasha's short laugh, followed by a reminder to Ogden Post, Johnnie's brother-in-law, who had been hopefully glacing at the four remaining numbers on the program, that there would doubtless be numerous encores — how many only God, and a Russian's insatiable determination to get his fill for his money, could tell. Father Vikenty turned to them, at once reproachful and encouraging. "Oh, no. Not so many. Next numberr on the program is Olga Terentieva. That is Terenteeva, you know. There will be many encores. After Terenteeva comes Ketevana — also many encores. But the next numberr says, No encores, in beeg letters. So you see — but now we have Terenteeva, at last!"

And he began to clap, slowly, loudly, provocatively, inviting others to follow his example. The audience took it up, and Terenteeva came out on the stage to the sound of loud applause. She might have been poured from neck to foot into her black gown

which yet was so designed as to give full freedom to her movements; and her large diamond cross was the only piece of jewelry she was wearing, except for a modest sparkle of small brilliants in her ears.

She stood for a moment, scanning the public. There was a touch of disdain to her upper lip as her eyes came to rest on the Princess's face, but when she caught sight of Johnnie she beamed. "Ladies and Gentlemen," she said in English, and stopped, frowning at the audience. "Don't flatter yourself. I'm not speaking to you. I'm speaking to our American friends here." and, "Ladies and Gentlemen," she cried, looking straight at Johnnie, "you must forgive me if I bore you this evening, but my dear benighted Russians seem to like my Russian numbers. They are determined to hear them, or else — get their money back!"

Her slight accent in English gave a touch of piquancy to her speech, and she seemed to possess in full measure the gift of making people laugh whenever she wanted to. For the audience roared with laughter now. Even Prince Tverskoy on Father Vikenty's right and Professor Bourkevitch on his left let out a few chuckles; while Boukashov and Kolia — particularly the latter — gave full vent to their mirth, thoroughly enjoying the rudeness of her humor.

This short introduction in English was followed by a solid half hour of Russian, Terenteeva's performance being a sort of Russian Ruth Draper act, interspersed by occasional tragic monologues from old-fashioned plays by Ostrovsky. And once again Father Vikenty came to the rescue of his young American friends, turning to them every now and then to explain in a rumbling whisper what it was all about: "Now she is imitating two fat Russian ladies talking about children . . . Oye, this is very sad! A woman holds a key in a thunderstorm — inevitable death . . . (He pronounced it "deaf.") Ah, now it is funny again! She is imitating a thin (he pronounced it "feen") Russian lady going to market and meeting a fat Russian lady, and they discuss their husbands who work in Housewreckers Union." But he had whispered once too often. Without in any way interrupting her act, Terenteeva cried out threateningly in English in the thick Russian accents of the thin marketing lady: "And eef I hearrr anozerrr sound out of zee

clerrgy, I vill sick my husband's Housewreckers Union on zees place"; which brought down the house and made Father Vikenty hide his blushing face behind his program.

This happened during one of her last encores. As a final encore, without the slightest warning, in one of her unpredictable changes of mood, she suddenly declaimed in English Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, leaving her audience in slight bewilderment, not knowing whether to cry, or laugh, or jump to its feet and make a wild patriotic demonstration. In the end they just sighed with emotion through their applause.

But the time had come for Ketevana's appearance. A young man came out and placed a chair in the center of the stage. And Father Vikenty, fully recovered now from his embarrassment, turned to Jerry Wilson. "Next numberr on the program is Ketevana Strelkin. You listen careful, Jerry. You get beeg surprise!"

And now Ketevana was on the stage, wearing an Armenian national costume, her hair done up in corkscrew curls, a little round headband worn low on the forehead, from which a white tulle veil fell to her shoulders. She didn't look at anyone. She just sat down, struck a few chords on her guitar, and began to sing. The magic of her voice, floating through the hushed silence to unknown heights, affected her audience even more than it had done at Terenteeva's. And Father Vikenty, taught by experience, led the applause after every song, giving her listeners no time to digest the beauty of her singing and embarrass her by their charmed silence. And for once Prince Tverskoy was applauding enthusiastically, exclaiming, "Perfect! Absolutely perfect!" The Princess sat in a kind of reverie; Mrs. Bourkevitch looked deeply moved, and the Professor muttered, "This was worth coming for"; while Kolia leaned forward in his chair with hands clasped and something very close to adoration in his eyes. "How he loves his little wife, God bless him," Father Vikenty murmured, moved by the expression on Kolia's face; but when he heard Jerry Wilson's exclamation, slangy but ecstatic, he turned and poked him in the chest. "Hah! I tell you you get beeg surprise. Now you get beeg excite, eh?"

"You can say that again, Father. She's marvelous!"

But gradually the enthusiasm and excitement died down, and people settled back in their chairs, patient and resigned, waiting for the penultimate number on the program, in which Terenteeva and Boris were co-starred.

Boris was the first to come out on the stage, clothed in magnificent rags. A moment later Terenteeva appeared, glistening from head to foot, the whole front of her Russian national costume and huge headdress covered with sparkling stones. The effect was instantaneous and somewhat frenzied. But when the applause finally died down, the act itself proved to be tedious, though luckily it did not last too long, and no encores were permitted — the program said so. Boris sang a song in Russian about the miseries of the people of Russia, and Terenteeva recited a poem by Voloshin on the past grandeur of Russia and her present degradation. And when she got through, to everyone's surprise the curtain was lowered for the first time in preparation for the final tableau.

For a while there was a good deal of commotion on the stage. The grand piano was apparently being moved and another heavy piece of furniture brought in. And an angry whispered argument between Ivan Ivanovitch and Madame Pishnik reached Father Vikenty's ears: "All of these, I say all of these"; "And I say, No! only two"; "Madame Pishnik, I question the sincerity of your anti-Communist feelings"; "Another word out of you, Ivan Ivanovitch, and there will be no tableau!"

Father Vikenty looked to his program for enlightenment. "Ah! Mystery!" he cried; for this last number had already aroused his curiosity. It was listed as "Tableau vivant — vivant," spelled out in Russian letters; and instead of giving the names of the cast, it simply said, "Surprise." So that when Father Vikenty read it in a loud and solemn voice, it sounded like this: Tabló veeván veëvän — sürpreez.

The lights in the hall went out — until then they had merely been dimmed — and the footlights on the stage shone on the dark red curtain, bringing into relief a painting of three legendary Russian heroes on horseback. A hum of excited anticipation ran through the audience. The leader of the Cossack choir stepped

into the proscenium, took a deep breath, and suddenly barked out, as though shouting a military command, "For the success of this tableau refrain from applauding until the curtain has been lowered."

He vanished. And a moment later the curtain rose, disclosing most of the entertainers of the evening, plus the four girls who had sold programs, grouped in the most abject postures: five of the Cossacks and Andrey Kugelman, the balalaika player in his bright blue Russian shirt, on their knees, heads bent to the ground and hands tied with chains behind their backs; the four program sellers and Ketevana kneeling in various poses of cowed despair; Boris Kirilenko in his magnificent rags lying prone on the floor, and Terenteeva standing over him, still in the same glistening costume, but with head bent in sorrow and hands chained together (she represented Russia of course). At one end of the stage on a raised platform stood a throne with a few steps leading to it, and on the throne sat Mr. Owtch disguised as Stalin. It took Father Vikenty a few seconds to recognize him behind his black mustache and with a fringe of false hair sewn to the rim of his military cap. And secretly he had to admit to himself that Mr. Owtch didn't look very much like Stalin. But just to eliminate all possible doubts, a large board had been pinned to the back of the throne, on which the word BEAST was written in big red letters.

For a full minute the cast remained in silent immobility. Then a bugle was heard in the distance. Terenteeva gave a start. She listened, glancing up fiercely into an imaginary sky; and with a dramatic gesture broke her chains and flung her arms out in sublime relief. And instantly all the others sprang to their feet breaking their chains. The chains, which were made of rubber, fell softly to the floor, bouncing about a little. No one however paid attention to this, for with a stifled cry Mr. Owtch had clutched at his heart, and was now toppling from his throne, falling, tumbling down the steps to the floor, where he proceeded to die in horrible convulsions. And in the midst of these paroxysms his military cap flew off, revealing a bald pate. But once again everyone's attention was diverted from this mishap by a whole avalanche of sickles and hammers that came crashing from above

with a deafening clatter, one of them almost hitting poor Mr. Owtch on the head. The actors, obviously taken by surprise, jumped and recoiled, then quickly assumed their various previously rehearsed postures of supreme jubilation. And Boris, with a Tarzan-like gloating, stuck his foot on Mr. Owtch's chest; and the leader of the Cossack choir appeared on the right, unfurling the old Russian white, blue and red flag; while Terenteeva swept up the steps, tore down the sign bearing the word BEAST, and grandly, magnificently seated herself on the throne. The entire cast froze into a tableau again. An invisible band struck up the "Preobrajensky March." And the curtain came down.

20

THE BALL was in full swing now. The rows of chairs had been removed. Supper had been served. People were either dancing or chatting at their tables, and an orchestra was playing on the stage. Father Vikenty moved from table to table, from group to group, maintaining his ubiquitous vigil — a happy one now that the Professor, suddenly drawn by some mysterious force into the purlieus of chivalry, had invited the Princess to an old-fashioned waltz, had twirled her around the dance floor several times, and had escorted her back to her table, taking his leave with a courtly bow. Father Vikenty's heart gave a leap of joy at the sight of it. He dared not admit even to himself the fullness of his elation as he strolled through this budding Eden.

"The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid." But even while repeating this quotation he couldn't refrain from a chuckle. For who could tell the wild from the tame in this temperamental flock of his? And with his thoughts still dwelling on the allegories provided by the animal kingdom, he came across something closely resembling an interview between a lion and a rooster — Boukashov and Ivan Ivanovitch engaged in a conversation.

Boukashov's shoulders were squared, his head thrown back. He was answering Ivan Ivanovitch with a certain hauteur that yet held wonder in it too, as though he were contemplating something peculiar and odd, while Ivan Ivanovitch, his hands clasped behind his back, his chest bulging, accentuated everything he said with a cocky upward jerk of his lumpy nose.

"And what did you think of our tableau?"

"It seemed to express the hope we all carry in our hearts."

"Yes, but the sickles and hammers? What did you think of

them? They were my idea. Madame Pishnik said two were enough. Such a disgusting paucity of expression! We need greater zeal, more aggressiveness and less timidity in our battle with bolshevism. So I climbed up there, risking my neck, carrying a box full of sickles and hammers and dumped the whole lot down on the stage — two for Russia, and two for every country writhing under the bolshevik yoke. Now what do you think of that?"

"I think you had the right spirit," was Boukashov's evasive answer.

Father Vikenty went on his way with another inner chuckle: So polite to one another. The Lord himself is guiding them.

He stopped for a brief chat with Miss Klüpfel. The good lady, still at her post, informed him that over three hundred people had shown up, and he was expressing his appreciation in appropriate exclamations, joyful and sonorous, when he noticed that Natasha had drifted away from Johnnie's party; and although she stopped here and there on her way to speak to friends, he saw that she was slowly but steadily gravitating toward Boukashov. And now she was leading him to her parents' table. The introductions seemed formal and a bit stiff; yet a few minutes later the Prince and Boukashov were engaged in a friendly, animated conversation, and this was more than his curiosity could stand. He joined them.

Except for Natasha, all the younger people were dancing, and only the older generation sat at the big round table, listening to the Prince and Boukashov. Aunt Ella eyed Boukashov in soured contempt; the others with an interest not altogether flattering, as though he were some prodigy. But the Princess was listening with an affable smile, the serenity of her delicate features untroubled; yet Father Vikenty knew that behind those deep shadows her eyes were subjecting Boukashov to a close and anxious scrutiny. Natasha knew it, too. She felt ill at ease. And with her face set as it was now, she looked her worst. It brought out the irregularity of her features, shorn of liveliness and vivacity, and even those uptilted eyes of hers seemed out of place.

The Prince, however, appeared to be enchanted with his new companion. Boukashov, so Father Vikenty learned later, had said the right thing from the very start. He had told the Prince — the

subject cunningly brought up by Natasha — that he had no use for Professor Bourkevitch. One of those irresponsible bunglers, he had said, who, calling themselves socialists, step recklessly into the noose of their own folly; besides which, he — Boukashov — had had enough of socialism anyway. This had created an immediate rapport. But to Father Vikenty's surprise it wasn't socialism they were discussing now but the genealogy of the Nashchokins — the Princess's family; and Boukashov's affluence of knowledge on the subject, the fact that through his studies of Russian history he had become familiar with the names and activities of the more famous Nashchokin ancestors, filled the Prince with delight. Boukashov himself seemed keenly interested, and they broke in on one another in a kind of interlocutory fervor. "Of course," Boukashov exclaimed, "the famous boyar Nikita Nashchokin in the days of Ivan the Terrible"; and, "Yes, yes," said the Prince, "my wife's father was also called Nikita. He played an important role in the *zemstvo*, you know"; and Boukashov: "Then there was Vladimir Nashchokin, one of Peter the Great's so-called fledglings"; and the Prince again: "Of course! And my brother-in-law there is called Vladimir too"; and Boukashov looked at them all with an air at once impressed and satisfied, while the Prince beamed at him, flattered and content. The Princess, who ordinarily found such topics rather boring, smiled encouragingly at Boukashov, and even Aunt Ella looked somewhat mollified.

And again Father Vikenty felt elated, secretly praising the Lord for another miracle wrought. But at the other end of the ballroom he saw the Professor eying them from his table, growing resentment pressing close behind his outward disdain; and Father Vikenty knew the time had come to mingle with the opposition.

It was not in the Professor's nature to beat about the bush. "Hah," he exclaimed, as Father Vikenty sat down beside him, "some of these former Sovietchiks are just a bunch of cheap snobs."

Father Vikenty puffed out his lips in dubitation. Not snobbery, he thought, in the sense in which the Professor meant it, but rather the thrill of suddenly finding himself among glorious ghosts he had thought dead but which by the magic of a name now

appeared alive and breathing, had drawn Boukashov to the Tverskoys and their relatives; yet for the life of him he could not put this into words. And there was, besides, that old ever present feeling that whatever he had figured out for himself, others, particularly the Professor, must have thought of before him. The Professor was being perverse. And in the end all he said was, "Oh well, historical figures always seem impressive."

But the Professor, still in a fractious mood, chose to see in this a eulogy to the Tverskoys, and into the pause he dropped an acid, "I think we have wasted enough time among historical figures. Shall we go, Lina?"

Mrs. Bourkevitch consented with a quick eager nod, but Father Vikenty pleaded with such real chagrin in his eye that the Professor finally gave in.

As a last incentive Father Vikenty had said, "And look, even Karp is enjoying himself for once!" His eyes had singled out Karp on the dance floor, performing strange contortions with a plump young woman. Now he looked away, suddenly embarrassed by the jerky obscenity of Karp's movements. And the Professor, guessing his thoughts, smiled. "Yes, Batiushka, in our time such things were done in a bedroom, and everyone felt fine. But today, caught in the crass materialism of the world, they try to be extroverts, with little success and often with dire results." And in one of those swift changes of mood, he suddenly chose to melt, to become good and kind and magnanimous. "Let's stay another half hour, Lina. What? I must confess, Batiushka, I have fallen under the spell of Princess Tverskoy. What a charming woman. Perhaps I'll ask her for another dance. What do you think, Lina?"

"Don't overtax yourself, Artemy," was Mrs. Bourkevitch's cautious warning.

And Father Vikenty left the Bourkevitches, rejoicing over the concatenation of miraculous conversions which seemed to unroll itself before him. "There is no end to Thy blessings," he said, his heart big with miracles sought and found.

His eyes searched the crowded ballroom, looking for Terenteeva. Even she, he felt, would have to admit that true and authentic peacemaking was in the air. But coming across Madame

Pishnik, he learned that Terenteeva and Boris had gone home after the concert. "She said she had a headache," Madame Pishnik explained. "She was furious about those sickles and hammers. And no wonder; I could wring Ivan Ivanovitch's neck! And — oh yes, she also told me to tell you you had won her participation in the concert but not in the rest of the comedy, whatever that may mean. Ah, these *artistes* are so eccentric, aren't they?" And she went about her business, tapping her forehead lightly with her finger, not in censure but in a kind of wistful fondness.

Father Vikenty's smile was perhaps a little sad, but he shrugged it away. Nothing, he thought, could dim his happiness that evening. And catching sight of Johnnie sitting at a table with his sister, he went to join them. Natasha was dancing with Boukashov, and it was obvious that they were discussing her — Millicent with restrained disapprobation, Johnnie with that look in his eyes Father Vikenty had grown to know so well, that endurance, willful but not weak, which seemed to rest on a sum of experience far beyond the scope of his thirty years. Father Vikenty felt an irresistible urge to cheer him up, and this looked like a propitious moment. Johnnie and Millicent were alone. Johnnie's brother-in-law was dancing with the blonde. Jerry Wilson at a nearby table was weaving rosy dreams for the two young Strelkins with his promise of a TV audition for Ketevana. And Father Vikenty said to himself, settling down between Johnnie and Millicent, Happiness is in the air tonight for everyone, and Johnnie must get his share, too.

Actually it was his own concentrated essence of happiness that was catching. Some of it transmitted itself to Johnnie and the sad look vanished from his eyes. He smiled as he poured out three whiskeys on the rocks. They clinked glasses, and Millicent said with a laugh — Johnnie's clear laugh but sounding even more pleasing, more beguiling in this slender young woman with an enticingly long neck and eyes lustrously dark and always a little pensive — "I've been looking forward to this, Father. Johnnie has told me so much about you. And Natasha says you are the most famous wrestler in the world and the strongest man on earth."

"Oh, what she say. Such exaggération! In my youth" — he

pronounced it "youf" — "yes, I had beeg muscles, like steel. But now no, only beeg stomach." And as though to justify his words, his stomach shook with silent laughter.

But with half his drink consumed, the remnants of those famous muscles began to stir in Father Vikenty's arms. And after another swallow the whiskey raced through his blood, sweeping away the advance guard of his resistance. He just had to brag now. And bending his forearm, he invited Millicent to feel his biceps.

"Oh, but they are fabulous even now."

He made a modest face. "Oh no. Not fabulous. Cotton vool."

Brother and sister laughed in unison. It was a delight to listen to them. And Johnnie said, "One of these days, Father, we must go to a wrestling match, you and I."

"Ech, don't tempt me, Johnnie. Archbishop no like when I go because I get too excite."

"I could give you a sedative, sir."

This Father Vikenty found very funny. He laughed, waving his hands and repeating, "Do not tempt, Johnnie, do not tempt an old man." And just as he threw back his head ready to let go a last good lungful, he caught sight of Prince and Princess Tverskoy and Aunt Ella getting ready to leave. He gulped down his laugh and jumped to his feet, excusing himself, "I must say goobye;" and was off almost at a trot.

The Professor had stopped the Tverskoys near the exit and was talking to them. He was bowing and saying a thousand amiable things in that very special tone of his which made every word he said sound strong and convincing. And the Prince, taken by surprise, expressed a mumbled hope that the Professor and Mrs. Bourkevitch would spend a week end with them in Connecticut; and the Professor said they most certainly would. In the end he even kissed the Princess's hand, a thing he had never done before. Yet it was not the Princess's undeniable charm, as Father Vikenty later found out, that was the real cause of the Professor's warmth and cordiality, but rather a sudden, instinctive desire for alliance and support brought on by the painful sight of Colonel Koudrov, his arch-enemy, sitting at Boukashov's small table, drinking and carrying on a conversation with Kolia and Ketevana and, worst of

all, with Boukashov himself — a conversation which bore all the marks of frigid courtesy but which to the Professor's jealous eyes had appeared as a display of mutual sympathy and understanding, mainly due to Ivan Ivanovitch and Mr. Owtch, the colonel's faithful adherents. They had stood behind their leader's chair, glancing now and then at the Professor with smirks of satisfaction and triumph on their shining red faces.

Blissfully ignorant of all this, Father Vikenty escorted the Tverskoys and Aunt Ella to the front door, his spirit soaring in a triumph of its own: At last, at last it has come to pass! And when they left, he stooped in an effusion of emotion and kissed Dragoon on the head. He hesitated. He felt too good to go straight back to the heat and stuffiness of the ballroom. Instead, he stepped out for a few moments into the narrow alley, taking Dragoon with him; and while the dog sniffed at the walls, the grateful priest gazed up at a starless sky, his short prayer full of hallelujas.

The orchestra was silent when he got to the ballroom door and angry voices reached his ears, but he was utterly unprepared for what he found. He stopped dead, rooted to the floor, his mouth gaping in stupefaction. The vast hall seemed full of evil intents and furious glances; and all of a sudden violence broke out. A number of the guests left in a hurry, rushing by him and exclaiming, "Can't you do something to stop this outrage, Batiushka?" But he hardly heard them. He stood in a state of shock.

Hurricanes can be foretold, but tornadoes give no warning; and this was a twister, if there ever was one. Later he learned how it had all started. The Professor on his way back to his table had met Karp in front of Boukashov's table and had stopped to talk to him, his back turned on Boukashov and the Colonel and the others. Undoubtedly he had derived a certain childish satisfaction in thus showing them how completely nonexistent they were to him, but the consensus of opinion was that he had not intended to upset the Colonel's glass. Be that as it may, a stray sweep of his hand had knocked it over, spilling its contents over the Colonel's knees. And the Colonel had sprung to his feet, showering abuse on the Professor; and the Professor, his face dark with demoniac glee, had made some caustic remark about the pumpkin shape and vacuity of the Colonel's head. This was when Father Vikenty had

come in. A moment later a dozen of the Professor's adherents and an equal number of the Colonel's men were rushing at each other with cries and curses. Chairs were raised and glasses broken, and women began to scream.

Father Vikenty saw it all in horrible nightmarish flashes. It was as if an invisible hand were shaking a devil's kaleidoscope and then holding it still, allowing the ugly patterns to fall into immobility in front of his incredulous eyes. Mr. Owtch shouted something incoherent at the Professor and vanished. The Colonel jumped forward gesticulating, his face twitching, and retreated. Then Ivan Ivanovitch appeared in his place, shouting so loud that even the brawlers stopped fighting and turned to stare at him. "Professor Bourkevitch," he yelled, "you are an ill-bred lout, the spawn of Ham!"

In the silence that followed, Jerry Wilson's exclamation, "Jesus, what a tableau," only served to strengthen the effect, for this was indeed the tableau of the evening: the remaining guests crowding together in the background, like a frightened herd; and the Professor standing a little apart, his adherents ranged behind him, and Mrs. Bourkevitch clinging to his arm and Yuri laying a restraining hand on his shoulder; and Ivan Ivanovitch and Karp in the center, glaring at one another; and the Colonel, trembling with fury, surrounded by his henchmen, Mr. Owtch among them; and Kolia with his arms flung in fond protection around Ketevana's shoulders; and Boukashov on his feet now, Natasha standing beside him, her eyes so big with surprise they seemed to swallow up her face; and Johnnie close behind them, shielding Millicent and the blonde, his brother-in-law at his side showing typical Anglo-Saxon restraint that seemed to say, I don't trust myself to speak to them now, but please tell them to stop.

And then the tableau stirred ever so slightly. Slowly, all jerkiness gone from his movements, Karp began to advance on Ivan Ivanovitch, his heavily scooped underlip hanging almost down to his chin. He came closer step by step, Ivan Ivanovitch watching him like an infuriated, embattled mushroom. He stopped within a foot, and through his teeth he said, "Say that again!"

"Of course I'll say it. Who do you think you are? Professor Bourkevitch is an ill-bred lout, the spawn of —"

He never finished. Karp's clawlike hand shot out and seized him by the nose, giving it a vicious twist; then slowly, implacably drew it downward, until Ivan Ivanovitch, whimpering, his arms flapping like a pair of dying wings, fell to his knees with a soft thud.

It was the sound of that thud that exploded in Father Vikenty's brain like a shrapnel, setting it ablaze. He felt the blood thrashing in his ears as he rushed forward, shouting, "God-killers!"

Seizing Karp by the shoulder, he sent him spinning across the room, where Karp, panting a little, remained leaning against a table until the Professor and Mrs. Bourkevitch in their headlong flight from the hall swept him along with them.

With his big chest heaving, Father Vikenty towered over the crowd, a giant of wrath, a new Moses fulminating over his broken tablets. "Out! Out all of you!" Madame Pishnik signaled frantically to the musicians and they struck up a tune, but Father Vikenty turned on them, thunderously. "Out, I tell you! The ball is over. Out!" And the musicians scurried off the stage.

Father Vikenty was beyond hearing, beyond seeing, beyond all ratiocination and thought. He did not see the mad stampede to the door and never knew how rapidly the hall emptied; he didn't even see Natasha stop for just an instant to look at him with frightened, pleading eyes, then turn and hurry out, clinging to Boukashov's arm. Nor did he see Ivan Ivanovitch crumpled in a chair behind him, nursing his rapidly swelling nose in both hands, yet looking up at him with worshiping, adoring eyes. He just stood there, his outstretched arm pointing to the door, as though holding a flaming sword of interdiction.

A few seconds elapsed and the hall was left in chaotic emptiness: broken glass strewn on the floor, chairs upset, tables turned over. And only two lonely figures remained near the door, gazing at him out of unblinking eyes. Dimly he saw them — Miss Katastrofoff with her hands folded as in supplication, and Madame Pishnik a huge vision of despair. She emitted a plaintive moan which at any other time would have broken his heart, but he remained unmoved, still pointing, his lips still forming the same, now silent word, Out! Madame Pishnik clamped her hand to her

mouth. Miss Katastrofoff covered her face with her hands. Then they were gone.

And in the dead silence that settled around him he felt a soft moist touch. It shot through him, raising goose pimples all over his flesh, as though a cold reptilian hide had crept under his skin. For he knew what it was — Ivan Ivanovitch had slid from his chair to one knee, and had kissed his hand.

A great shudder shook his whole frame. He tore his hand away and fled, running through the front hall, down the corridor, and into the church, where he fell prostrate in front of the high altar. How long he remained there he did not know. He wasn't praying. He just lay there, shuddering and groaning from time to time. The temple he had tried to build up stone by stone had been torn down not by the infidel but by the hands of the faithful, and demons were at large where he had thought angels were rejoicing. This, and the blind rage he had once again fallen prey to, were the plummets of his despair. And underlying it all, half conscious, was a feeling of slime that made him rub the back of the hand Ivan Ivanovitch had kissed against his cassock, now and then, as though it were sticky and unclean.

But in the midst of this turmoil of the spirit a solid thought was born. Tiny at first, as tiny as a mustard seed, it grew and spread and rose, and his body rose with it until he found himself standing on his knees, facing the closed altar gates. He struck his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Fool! Blind, presumptuous fool! Of course! Even a child could have told you. Not in the Club and not at a ball, but here in this blessed church it must come to pass. And in God's time, not in yours." He crossed himself and bowed his head to the floor. "Forgive me, O Lord, for thrusting my sinful will into your scheme of things."

And not in palliation but in subjection, in an unculled submission to a will greater than his own, he found the peace and calm that now enveloped him. It was as if all the gentle eyes of the icons and all the soft shimmering lights of the image lamps had suddenly filled his soul. Slowly he stood up, rising from the ashes, faith, hope, humility reborn, and Judas's kiss of adoration still on his hand but no longer felt.

Part Two

1

SIX DAYS went by and no one had reported the scandal to Archbishop Sofrony; at least not in a light sufficiently detrimental to Father Vikenty to bring forth a reprimand. The man who might have done so had kept his mouth shut. Madame Pishnik had said, "Ivan Ivanovitch hasn't squealed on you this time, Batiushka, because his conscience is pricking him, and the mark of his own guilt is on his face"; and Miss Katastrofoff had exclaimed in sudden glee, surprising in one by ordinary so timid and shy, "The church warden has had his tail pinched and I don't think he will wag it again for some time." But Father Vikenty knew better. It was not Ivan Ivanovitch's nose, unbroken but badly bruised, that had kept him silent. His lips were sealed, whose heart had worshiped at a forbidden altar at once too precious and too shaming to be revealed, alive now but in the memory of things never to be resuscitated or even recaptured. And since hand in hand with these memories went a deep resentment of Father Vikenty's shudder, of that recoil that had sent him fleeing to the protection of his church, it seemed inevitable for Ivan Ivanovitch, gnawed by his frustration and his bitterness, to be sooner or later mercilessly driven to excesses of revenge.

Father Vikenty knew this, or rather he sensed it — for he could never have put it into words. But he was not troubled by it. What was to be was to be; and of one thing he now felt certain — that hour spent alone in the church had purified him, had cleansed him of his blind rages. Never again, he said to himself, unaware of the pitfalls that often lie concealed in categorical statements. Never again.

On Sunday few people had shown up in church; and those who had come had glanced at Father Vikenty in awed curiosity, as

though seeing him in a new light. But outside of Madame Pishnik and Miss Katastrofoff, no one had mentioned the Concert-Ball in his presence; and Ivan Ivanovitch had lain low, watching him out of secret eyes.

Yet Father Vikenty knew of course that the incident was being passionately discussed by his parishioners, almost to the exclusion of all other topics of conversation, and that opinions were sharply divided. Some of these reactions he could have guessed at if he had wanted to without hearing them: Natasha had said, "It is strange, so strange that our dear Batiushka, who is so good and kind and humble, should always be getting into trouble and have to suffer such dreadful disappointments. But perhaps more is exacted of those who come closer to saintliness"; and her mother had agreed with this, while her father had said, "He is a good man, but he has an unbridled nature"; and the Professor had said, "As a wrestler he would have done well"; and Boukashov had said, "He made much noise but did he make much sense?" and Sandra had said, "I'm shocked!" and Terenteeva had said when she had been told about it, "Oh, he is a great comedian. I've always said so."

Father Vikenty's own reactions were entirely self-critical. Whenever he fell to thinking of those dreadful moments — and he thought of them constantly during the day and often during the night, too — a quotation from the Bible would rise up in his mind — "My spirit shall not always strive with man for that he also is flesh" — and he would repeat it, thinking not of others but of himself. "Heavy are my sins and hard is my flesh upon me." A new look, one of wistful sadness, had settled at the back of his eyes, seemingly to stay; yet every time that he thought of that blissful elation with which his beloved church had filled his soul, an elation that precluded any animosity and rancor, his ingrained optimism would assert itself again, and he would say in all sincerity and humility, "Now would such a blessing have come just for me alone? Of course not! I wasn't quite prepared for it, that's all. What a disgrace to the church if the priest were found lagging on the great day — a day that now is bound to come. Yes, in our church, and in God's time."

And on this Friday morning he was sitting half reclined in his big armchair, with Dragoon sprawling at his feet as usual, daydreaming like a schoolboy of that which he longed to see most — the miracle of reconciliations. He saw it already ripened and in bloom, the day when Miss Katastrofoff would no longer address Ivan Ivanovitch in the third person, and all other hatchets would be buried. And suddenly his reverie turned into a solid vision as concrete and as tangible as reality itself. It was as if he had been projected into things that were to come, into a Sunday still unborn, when all his parishioners would leave church after divine service and stand in small compact groups on the sidewalk. He saw the Professor discussing something with Colonel Koudrov and the Prince and Boukashov; he saw Karp and Ivan Ivanovitch and Mr. Owtch whispering to one another, and Terenteeva talking animatedly to the Princess, and Mrs. Bourkevitch consoling Miss Katastrofoff; he saw many others in friendly concourse, whose lives had heretofore been poisoned by mutual animosity. The gift of hearing seemed to have been withheld from him. He could see their lips moving but could not hear their voices; yet he knew that they were all of one mind, and this filled him with joy: I thank you, O Lord. I could die in peace now that you have granted me the favor of seeing it with my own eyes.

And then he saw Natasha standing alone on the church steps, her face set in sadness that almost verged on despair. He thought that she was torn between her love and her infatuation, between Johnnie and Boukashov, and his whole heart went out to her, who by her very existence had so often filled the void left by Lenochka, the child that was no more. And he said to her, Do not fret, Natasha dear. Things will work out. You will marry Johnnie, yet somehow remain reconciled with Boukashov. And no one will be hurt, nobody will suffer.

But even as he said this, everything changed: the sidewalk, the church steps vanished, and he saw her in the disrupted ballroom, clinging to Boukashov's arm. This new vision not of the future but of the past was perplexing and disturbing. At first he thought it was a fragment of some forgotten dream, for he had no recollection of having actually seen it. But as he searched his mind, he knew

that it belonged to the "has been," that in her fear and despair she had turned to Boukashov, not Johnnie; and he felt distressed. He hadn't heard from her since the ill-fated Concert-Ball, and that in itself seemed strange. Was she too entangled in her emotions, too miserable perhaps to give anyone else a thought? Was her infatuation, then, so strong that it must needs trample on Johnnie's love? And would she live to regret it? Ech, Natasha! Whichever road she chose would be a hard one, and he must be ready to stand by her. With the old Prince so prejudiced, so intolerant and stubborn, she would need all the moral support she could get. And he was still pondering over her problems when the telephone rang on his desk.

Reluctantly, still half reclining in his armchair, his stomach under his well-worn flannel dressing gown protruding like a mount, he picked up the receiver. *"Allo — ?"* But at the very first word that reached his ear he sat up in surprise, for there was Natasha as though he had conjured her up, the clarity of her voice with its lighthearted overtones, its playfulness and gaiety, coming almost as a shock after the mournful cogitations with which his mind had been enveloping her.

"Hello! Is that you, Batiushka? But of course, what a silly question! Dragoon hasn't learned to speak yet, has he?" She laughed and emitted a growly "Hello" with which, presumably Dragoon might have answered the telephone. "And by the way, before I forget, Punty sends him his love. He is sitting right here beside me, saying, 'Be sure to give Dragoon a big hug from me, and one to my godfather too.' That means you, Batiushka." She laughed again.

Such a chatterbox, he thought, but what a pleasure to hear her! And she said, "How are you, Batiushka? I feel so ashamed not to have called you sooner. But please don't think I haven't thought of you. On the contrary, I've been thinking of you all the time. Really and truly I have. Of you and of that dreadful ordeal of yours. Such disgusting, shameless brutes — But I'm afraid it can't be said of me, 'Better late than never,' for I am calling you now to ask a favor of you. You see how selfish I am, you see, you see? But at least I always tell you the truth, don't I?" She paused for an instant to catch her breath. "Are you free this evening, Batiushka?

For the whole evening, I mean. Please, please make yourself free. I warn you, I won't take no for an answer. It's got to be yes. Today is Johnnie's birthday, and he said it wouldn't be a birthday at all if you didn't join us for dinner and — Oh, but I almost gave it away. He made me promise not to tell. It's a surprise! Darling Batiushka, do say you'll come. We must do everything we can to make him happy, you know. I'm afraid it won't be long now before they send him abroad. So you see, you simply must say yes. We'll come and pick you up at the church around half past six. Okay?"

At the very first mention of Johnnie's name Father Vikenty had been inclined to accept. But now, with all this concern over Johnnie's, not Boukashov's, happiness, which seemed like an answer to his prayer, he forgot all caution and didn't even question her about the surprise. "A wise priest always avoids surprises," was an axiom Archbishop Sofrony had laid down many years before, when shortly after his ordination Father Vikenty had accepted an invitation to a surprise party and had later found himself on the top of the Woolworth Building, thundering the Great Liturgical Prayer at the rising sun, with only a drunken nightwatchman for a congregation. He gave no thought now either to the Archbishop's warnings or to his own past follies; he just said, "Yes, yes," several times, and stood up, replacing the receiver. He stretched himself, a big happy smile spreading through his beard, and Dragoon jumped to his feet, gazing up at him out of eager, questioning eyes, his head jerking in hopeful anticipation. And Father Vikenty said, "Yes, Dragoonushka, yes. Let's go for a stroll in the park and rejoice."

That evening at seven Father Vikenty sat between Johnnie and Natasha at a corner table at the Samarkand, a Russian restaurant in the West Fifties. He felt happily conscious of the sparkle in Johnnie's eyes every time they sought out Natasha's and found a responsive tenderness in them. And he was delighted with the low-ceilinged, dimly lit restaurant. A most appropriate spot, he thought, for the rebudding of love, although at any other time he would have cried out, "For heaven's sake bring me some light! It's so dark in this cellar I can't even find my own mouth!"

For the Samarkand was a vaulted place with an overabundance

of dim blue lights which hardly gave any light at all. Somewhere behind a column a violin was playing sad Russian tunes, and opposite Father Vikenty a bar seemed flooded with moonlight. And so was his heart after the hors d'oeuvres had been eaten and a few vodkas had been drunk to his happiness, and to the happiness of Johnnie, and Natasha, and the whole demon-ridden world, as Johnnie put it.

"What you say, Johnnie? I fink demons no ride, they crawl."

"Well, sir, that depends which way you look at it. I for one can't see it from God's point of view."

Father Vikenty laughed softly. There was neither bitterness nor malice in Johnnie's tone, only hidden laughter and a little good-natured teasing that seemed to establish a new, a more intimate bond between them. And Father Vikenty's contentment, sustained now by a satisfied palate, grew and expanded on the *pirojkis* he ate with his soup, and the wine he drank with his Beef Stroganoff, and the champagne that came with the Crème Brulée; so that by the time Johnnie suggested a brandy with their coffee he was beyond refusing anything. "Ech, Johnnie, I no should. But I shall. Next Monday is beginning of Lent, and for forty days and forty nights I vill not drink no more!" And having thus assuaged his stricken but helpless conscience, he clinked glasses with Johnnie.

The drinks had affected Johnnie, too. He had lost his usual reticence and was becoming loquacious. "I want to drink this one to my Aunt Ada," he said. "She is one of my mother's sisters, and this is really her party, you know. Every year she sends me a check for my birthday, accompanied by the same note: 'I hope you will invest it in something worthwhile.' And so I always give myself and my friends a good time, and I always drink to Aunt Ada's good health. For although she is pretty staid now, she was once upon a time the next-best rebel in the family. My mother, of course, was the best and foremost rebel, having married my father."

Father Vikenty nodded several times and opened his eyes wide in interest rather than in astonishment, and Natasha said, "Tell us about your Aunt Ada, Johnnie."

"Oh, it's too long to tell. It's just that in her youth, instead of

getting married she got mixed up with a married man. And then the man got killed in an automobile accident, and Aunt Ada took to drink in a big way. And my grandmother said, 'Ada is lost,' and forbade her the house. But Aunt Ada cropped up again, wrapped up as a gift parcel one might say, married to the very man her mother had chosen for her in the first place, and decorous as decorous could be. For poor Aunt Ada, you see — and this is the point of my story, if there is any point to it — learned nothing from her sad vicissitudes. She went through hell always remembering she was a Van Stralem."

Father Vikenty puffed out his lips and shook his head dolefully to express his solicitude and sympathy. But Natasha had guessed that there was more to come. She seemed to be holding her breath as she gazed at Johnnie across the table; and Johnnie drank fully of her eyes before raising his glass, this time to her alone. "And I say there is some good in hell. Not in Aunt Ada's hell perhaps, but in the kind of hell that teaches a guy a few things, providing of course it doesn't last too long. And I think that mine is coming to an end tonight. So, gratefully I now drink to it — to my hell."

Natasha was on the verge of tears, but Father Vikenty in his state of light inebriation did not notice it. Nor was his English good enough to grasp all the implications in Johnnie's toast. Hell to him was too ponderous a word to be taken lightly, particularly now, with the sin of overindulgence heavy upon him. He waved both his hands in horror. "No, no, Johnnie. No, no, no! I no drink to hell. Even to fink of it make me trrremble!"

"Oh, listen to him," Johnnie laughed. "As if you needed to worry, Father. You'll never see it."

And Natasha said, "Only in this life perhaps, Batiushka darling, only in this life."

They meant it, too, out of the fullness of their hearts; but these were just the sort of remarks that filled Father Vikenty with utter embarrassment and confusion. And while Johnnie paid the bill and Natasha went to powder her nose, he all but ran across the low vaulted restaurant to take refuge in the men's room, where he splashed cold water over his face, muttering, "Sober up, worm, sober up, and don't grow conceited."

He need not have worried about conceit, it played no part in his make up; but no amount of cold water could sober him sufficiently to withstand the temptation that lay in store. The alcohol was racing through his blood now, undermining better judgment and washing away resistance.

When he and Johnnie and Natasha got into a taxicab, he asked, "Where we go now?" more for the sake of saying something than in search of an answer which he perhaps already knew. And he accepted their sly glances and the meaningful shakes of their heads with a soft laugh of joyful anticipation. For whatever premonitions he may have had were overridden by recklessness, by that I'll-wade-the-ocean-it's-just-up-to-my-knees frame of mind which always came upon him after he had had too much to drink; so that when the taxi drew up in front of an armory, and he got out and saw the poster starring Nick Papadracopulos, the Greek, and Stefan Zgryszko, the Pole — the one great wrestling match he had longed to see — his heart began to pound, and he was forced to stop dead in order to catch his breath.

Natasha and Johnnie, mistaking this for a protest, took him by the elbows and led him into the armory, straight to their seats, never once letting go of him. And Father Vikenty kept repeating, "Och, you tempt silly old man, och," not reproachfully but in a kind of passive acquiescence in their conspiracy. And throughout the minor contests he sat in tense excitement, his face glistening with emotion and sweat. There was nostalgia and wonderment in his eyes, as though he were both reliving the past and looking into the future, not sure whether this was reality or a dream, but certain that he would never see it again: this beloved sport, this passion of a lifetime, this truncated ambition of his youth, whose roots, still alive and clinging, must yet be ruthlessly torn out and cast away if he were ever to attain the peace which his soul craved. And his eyes at once hungry and wistful took in every movement of the contestants. He seemed to have forgotten about Natasha's presence; Johnnie he remembered only twice, turning to him to whisper, "If I get too excite, you peench or give me sedative."

And when the interval came he drew a long tremulous breath and held it, closing his eyes. Johnnie fished an old-fashioned silver flask out of his hip pocket. "I don't suppose it would be proper,"

he said, "for a priest to run across the street to a bar, so I came provided as for a football game." Natasha took a sip and Johnnie took a swallow, but Father Vikenty, anxious now to drown the nostalgia that was gripping at his heart, took two long avid draughts; and they were his undoing.

At first during the big match he still managed to keep himself more or less in hand, merely bouncing a little in his seat with excitement.

"Want to bet on one of them, Father?" Johnnie asked.

"Oh, I don't know, Johnnie. Bofe are very good. Very. Great champions! Also I like both so very much."

He liked Nick the Greek because he was of the Greek Orthodox faith — his own faith — while Stefan the Pole was a Roman Catholic; on the other hand Stefan was a Slav, and that, the ancient enmity between Russians and Poles notwithstanding, made him seem almost like a brother. For a while he encouraged them both with loud grunts of approval. But when the Greek committed a foul, an indignant "No, no, no" made people turn around and stare at Father Vikenty, while his sympathies veered sharply in favor of the Pole. And from then on there was no holding him, even though Natasha tugged at his sleeve, and Johnnie took him at his word and pinched him several times.

And when finally the Pole had pinned the Greek to the boards, and the Greek tried to wriggle out of his grasp with convulsive jerks of his thick body and a frantic kicking of hairy legs, a prolonged roar escaped Father Vikenty's parched throat — "Oh-oh-oh-oh!" He sprang to his feet, shouting in Russian, "Hold him, brother, hold him. Rub him into the dust from which he came, the rascal!"

For just an instant total silence fell upon the armory, and the thunder of his own voice hit Father Vikenty. He suddenly collapsed into his chair, clamping his hand to his mouth and rolling his eyes in horror. "I told you, oh I told you," he murmured in despair. And Johnnie and Natasha, a little scared now of what they had done yet shaken so by silent laughter that the tears came streaming down their cheeks, exclaimed in unison, "But you've had a swell time, a wonderful time, haven't you?"

And now they were slowly moving with the crowd toward the

exit, Father Vikenty's chest heaving, his mind bent on one thing only — to escape, to get away. But near the door they came to a stop, suddenly confronted by Ivan Ivanovitch. He seemed to have risen out of the ground, as red and as poisonous as a toadstool, with Mr. Owtch standing behind him, looking a little sheepish, while the crowd pushed and milled around them, swearing at this sudden encumbrance.

"I congratulate you, Father Vikenty," Ivan Ivanovitch said, unbearably pompous in his indignation; "you have disgraced us in front of the entire world. Everybody heard you! Your voice pierced every ear! Don't you know that that voice was given you for holy purposes, and God transforms it into the roar of a wild beast when you raise it in dissoluteness?" Then, suddenly savage, he turned on Natasha. "As for you, Princess, you should be ashamed of yourself, getting a priest drunk and leading him astray, just for your own amusement and that of your cavalier. You are a disgrace to the noble name you bear, that's all I can say!"

There was a certain amount of truth to these vituperations, but Natasha's pride rendered her impervious to his taunts. That cold, haughty, impenetrable air came upon her, turning her merry eyes into two icy blades; and her every word was like a sharp slap: "That's enough. You may go!"

And Ivan Ivanovitch stepped aside, transmogrified, the bully in him cowed; while Mr. Owtch said, peevishly, "Come, Ivan Ivanovitch. Have you forgotten that this is my wedding anniversary and you are helping me to celebrate it?"

A foolish smile began to spread through Father Vikenty's beard. He knew that this encounter would have serious repercussions, that every detail would be reported to Archbishop Sofrony and a severe penance would inevitably follow, laid upon him not in writing but in direct confrontation, as the Archbishop had said; and his smile, set now into a solid grin, expressed nothing but inner tension and dismay. Yet at the sight of it Ivan Ivanovitch shook his fist in impotent rage; and Mr. Owtch, fearing the worst, flung both his arms around Ivan Ivanovitch's waist, drawing him forcibly away.

But Father Vikenty was no longer thinking of the two men.

Something had happened to Natasha that filled him with alarm — the color had left her cheeks and for a moment he thought she was about to faint. Then Boukashov loomed into his field of vision, and he knew the cause of her sudden agony; for Boukashov was coming toward her, his face white with fury and jealousy and injured pride.

Father Vikenty flung out his arm to stop him, but Boukashov brushed him aside. He stopped in front of Natasha, his outraged eyes cutting through her. "You will come with me," he said in a coarse rough tone of command; and the familiar "thou" which he used revealed to Father Vikenty that which he had hoped would never come to pass between those two.

The blood came rushing back to Natasha's face, suffusing her neck and ears. Johnnie had taken a step forward, his calm and gentle face suddenly set as for a punitive assault, but she held him back. "Take me home, Johnnie," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "At once. Please!"

They left without a backward glance, and Boukashov turned to Father Vikenty, sardonic now in the face of his defeat. Father Vikenty became dimly aware of Kolia's presence, hovering in the distance, ready to come to his uncle's assistance; but Boukashov dismissed him with a sharp, imperious gesture, as he said, "There's your noble aristocracy for you. No wonder we did away with them! I'm told this is not an ordinary little Jew. I'm told he is rich and has a certain social standing here. So the Princess is selling herself for money and a better position in the capitalist world."

Father Vikenty's head shot forward, bull-like, and his eyes glistened dangerously. "That isn't true, and you know it!"

And in the rapidly thinning crowd the two men stood facing each other, their eyes clashing. Then slowly, reluctantly, Boukashov withdrew his, passing his hand over them as though to brush away a painful sight. "I wish I did," he said at length. "How I wish I did."

2

"AND SO, Father Vikenty, you sit there saying nothing. Just because you knew Natasha when she was a little girl, a little angel of innocence and purity, you still persist in thinking of her as a paragon of virtue specially protected by some guardian angel. But I say there are no guardian angels, and Natasha is selfish and fickle. Yes, that's what I say!"

They were seated now over a bottle of vodka and a plate of salami in Father Vikenty's kitchen, each one clinging to this midnight vigil as a means of escape from his loneliness and misery. For Boukashov wanted to talk, to dig deep into his pain and deprivation, in which Natasha played but a secondary albeit a poignant part, while Father Vikenty knew he had reached a point at which he could no longer stop drinking, and the thought of another night squandered in dejection and drunken oblivion filled him with dread. Yet because of Boukashov's presence, and the sound of his voice, and the things he was saying — but mainly because of his presence — he wasn't drinking at all. Now and then he would raise his pony glass of vodka to his lips and then replace it on the table without taking so much as a sip.

Boukashov had been talking about Natasha for over half an hour, spilling the bile of his injured pride and trying to sugar-coat his bitterness with sarcasm, but Father Vikenty sensed that with this wound cut open and drained the man would turn to that which was really churning within him, within that deep inner existence which every man and woman leads but which in him had been uprooted and left dangling in an agonizing void. And this knowledge, born of clairvoyance rather than reason (for hadn't he sensed that void in Boukashov the very first time he had met him?), gave Father Vikenty the patience he required to endure the disparaging

allegations against Natasha and ignore the irritating magisterial tone which Boukashov had assumed. "Ech, Boukashov," he sighed, "I fear to judge."

"You fear to judge Natasha, but you do not fear to judge me."

"I fear to judge you, too."

"And why should I believe that? She will have told you doubtless that I have a violent jealous nature, that I am rough and crude, and you will have judged me accordingly."

Father Vikenty shook his head, waving his hands at Boukashov, "No, no, no! She told me nothing. I saw it with my own eyes. I saw it at Terenteeva's and again tonight, but I didn't judge you for it. To judge is a great sin, and I have sinned enough against you as it is. Yes, I must confess it. I prayed that Natasha should not fall in love with you, and when I saw that she was falling in love, I prayed that she should find the strength to leave you. I did it because in the first place you are too old for her, dear man, and in the second place the stamp of Cain is still fresh upon you."

"The stamp of Cain?" Boukashov repeated the words, drawing them out in amazement. Had they been flung at him in anger he might have retaliated in kind, but Father Vikenty's quiet, kindly tone left him stunned, and the blood came creeping slowly up to his temples. "You say this, yet you still maintain you haven't judged me?"

"But it's not my judgment, it's your own. You said as much the first time we met, when you spoke of those who had committed acts of cruelty, ruthlessness, and even treachery for the promotion of their faith. Only you call it faith, I call it the stamp of Cain."

There was less smile than sneer now in the folds of Boukashov's mouth. "There is little difference," he said, "between killing a man or robbing him and leaving him and his family destitute, which is what your world has been practicing for generations."

This sudden attack on the world in which Boukashov had sought refuge did not surprise Father Vikenty. Like the worm, bitterness has a way of turning. And Father Vikenty said, soothingly: "Ech, Boukashov, my dear man, your world and my world are both sinful, I won't deny it. But it's not of fratricide that I am speaking now, not of the killing of the flesh but of the killing of conscience. For

isn't there greater charity in saying, 'May God guide your conscience, and God is merciful to sinners,' than in saying, 'Stalin is your conscience and your guide, and there is no forgiveness of sin'?"

Boukashov forced a short laugh that was devoid of mirth. "Has it occurred to you, my dear Father Vikenty, that Natasha has acted in a singularly ruthless way for one who has been brought up in a world that claims to be merciful? So why should I be the one to forgive?"

"Because it would ease your soul. But if you haven't got it in you to forgive, then drink your vodka and try to forget." Father Vikenty took a swallow out of his glass, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then picked up a slice of salami and bit into it.

Almost mechanically Boukashov followed suit. He drank his vodka, wiped his mouth with his hand, and took a piece of salami. But he held it above the table, his little finger curling daintily. And, seeing it, Father Vikenty suddenly broke into a soft laugh, his whole frame shaking, not in derision but in a kind of drunken wonder that so big and so substantial a man should have a finger so small and curly.

Instantly Boukashov was on the defensive. "What are you laughing at? I see nothing funny!"

"Ech, Boukashov, Boukashov, it's my stupid old eyes that make everything seem funny tonight." He wanted to add, How funny and foolish that two grown men should be sitting like this, talking of forgiveness and unforgiveness, of volition and unvolition, when all they really want is to get away from themselves, but he could not find the words; and with the urge for idle talk upon him he might have said something quite inappropriate if his attention hadn't been drawn to Dragoon. Until then Dragoon had been dozing on his mattress, but now he was roaming restlessly about the room, glancing at Father Vikenty with puckered brow and worried eyes.

"Dragoonushka, Dragoon! That I should have forgotten you isn't funny at all!" Father Vikenty stood up. "I won't be long, Boukashov. I'll just take Dragoon around the block. Otherwise the devil only knows what may happen, and Dragoonushka will die of shame."

But Boukashov had also risen to his feet. "I need a breath of fresh air," he said. "I will come with you."

They descended the shabby brown stairs, Dragoon tugging anxiously at his leash; and out of the tail end of his eye Father Vikenty saw that one of the doors on the ground floor — the door he had come to dread when in his cups — stood ajar. He knew that the woman who lived there must be watching them. He didn't know her name, nor had he ever spoken to her, yet he feared her more than anything in life, this fat slovenly woman with a pasty white face, for she always seemed to know when he had been drinking and would stand waiting for him in her doorway, licking her lips and luring him with shameless eyes; and every time a heavy, ugly lust would creep into his veins, and he would run as from a fire, making a mental sign of the cross and muttering to himself, "Tfu! Satan, the horny beast, so forgive me God, so help me God!"

But tonight Boukashov's presence gave him confidence, and the woman remained hidden behind her door. When they returned from their short walk the door was shut; and the fact that it was shut and the woman safe within seemed like a personal victory over temptation. In the sudden elation that came upon him he felt as if the ocean were just up to his knee. He ran upstairs, wanting to do something daring, showy, so that his whole being could assert itself; and in front of his door he stopped, his eyes fixed on his visiting card above the disemboweled doorbell. An exclamation at once of outrage and relief escaped him. "Ah! Who could it be who dared to eradicate Dragoonushka's name? Such effrontery, I swear to God! The man who did it should be taught to mind his own business. Boukashov, friend of my heart, give me a pencil, quick, and to the devil with Ivan Ivanovitch!" He snatched the pencil which Boukashov held out, and bending sideways, his elbow resting against the wall, his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth to ease the tension, he wrote under his own name the words: "and Dragoon Vikentievitch Kadilov."

"There," he cried, straightening himself and admiring his scrawl. "Dragoonushka's legal residence and identity have been re-established." And the swagger of Dragoon's backside graphically illustrated his appreciation of this recognition.

But Boukashov shook his head in disapproval. And when they

were seated once again in the kitchen, he leaned forward with his elbows on the table and said: "No, Father Vikenty, you are not the man. You are not the man for me. You have no discipline. One can see it at a glance, it is written all over your face — kindness and compassion yes, but no precision, no exactitude, no discipline. I don't know why I didn't lose interest in you from the very start. I wouldn't have given you a second's thought, I can assure you, if it weren't for that uncanny flair of yours, that clairvoyance, that divination, for I believe you knew right away that I had a heavy conscience, that I carried with me a burning agony I'd give anything to be rid of." He pointed with his finger to his chest. "Well, you were right. I've been searching for answers that might ease my pain, seeking a new faith, but not in the church. I still think of the church as a hypocritical institution which has always sided with the powerful and the rich, which has tolerated, nay sanctioned wars and racial prejudices and social injustices. And what could your church give me — I mean the Russian Church here in America? Why, it's all divided, all split up into factions, into warring camps. Some want to be under the Patriarchate of Moscow, others under a European Synod of bishops, and others again want an independent American Church. And they all hate each other, anathematize each other."

Father Vikenty lowered his eyes to his hands. This was a painful subject he tried never to discuss, these squabbles in the Russian Church. He took his orders from his bishop, but beyond that he didn't go. The rest was up to the prelates, he felt. How could he and his laymen help when even among themselves they hadn't found peace? For just an instant he dwelt on his favorite theme: Ah, but when they found themselves united in harmony and brotherly love, then they would become an instrument for peace, for it was to this end, he felt sure, that the miracle of reconciliations would eventually take place.

Boukashov's droning voice brought him back to reality. "No, Father Vikenty, I give you your church, and all other churches with it. What I need is a man, a man of God I might say, if by the word God you mean the same thing I do — an everlasting principle, which I have dimly begun to perceive. Not a merciful principle,

mind you, but one that knocks you out when you break the law. Or rather, I should say, the principle is the law, and you knock yourself out every time you break it. And so to return to what I was saying — because of that clairvoyance of yours, which I can sense in spite of all your shortcomings, I thought you might be the man. I came to your church the other day, ready to talk, to confess as it were, but you put me off with your foolish excitement over your Triumvirate. No, I said to myself, he isn't the man. And I spoke only of Natasha. And again tonight you made my agony flare up anew when you said that the stamp of Cain was still too fresh upon me. Oh, you have a way of putting your finger on sore spots. The stamp of Cain! You will never know how well you expressed yourself. And as I sat here, tortured by what you had said, I was also filled with a new hope. I said to myself, 'Perhaps he is my man after all.' But now, with all this fuss over your dog, with all this drunken foolishness, I know you are not."

He settled back in his chair, gazing quizzically at Father Vikenty across the table. "For how could you, whose whole being is in a state of chaos, be of any help to me? I was trained from my earliest days to take no interest in my own personality, to consider it as totally unimportant. I'll admit now that it was a sort of anesthetic administered in order to dull a man's conscience and render him morally obtuse, so that he could commit the treachery, the crimes he was told to do without turning a hair. But you — you have been so preoccupied with your own personality, your own emotions, and you have been so anxious not to tread on anybody's toe, that now there is nothing in you but chaotic softness and sentimentality. I'm looking for a strong, wise, disciplined mind, not a soft sentimental heart that can only break down and sob with compassion. For what would you say, my most estimable Father Vikenty, my boon companion, my poor kind drunken *pope*, if I told you that here in your kitchen tonight you have been entertaining a man guilty of the greatest crime of all, the crime of genocide? You would doubtless pale and shudder. Well, shudder then! For seven years now I have been branded with that crime, ever since January nineteen forty-four when the Germans were driven out of eastern Russia and I was sent to help liquidate the Chechen-Ingush tribes

of the Caucasus. They were condemned for treason, for having collaborated with the Germans. Condemned in secret and *in absentia* of course, and we gave them no chance to fight for their lives. As usual we tricked them. We told them to gather on a certain day in a certain place in their best apparel, in their full regalia, telling them that they were going to be honored. And then we fell upon them and drove them into boxcars, and dispatched them to the devil's backdoor in Siberia. And after that we rounded up their women and children and dispatched them, too. No one will ever know how many perished on the way, how many perished in the wilds, and how few, if any, still survive. I must confess I felt some qualms at the time, while helping to commit this abomination. I asked myself, Why did these men collaborate with the Germans when History tells us that during the First World War they had fought valiantly for the Tsar? Something must have gone dreadfully wrong. And I had similar qualms again after the war, when I heard that two million Tartars had been sent in the same way from the Crimea, their native land, to Siberia, that devil's dump. It almost seemed as though I had participated in that crime, too. Why, I would ask myself, had these people defaulted, who through generations had been faithful and loyal? Those were secret, very secret thoughts, mind you, which I tried to crush at the time. I would say, There is no room for sentimentality in our New Order. A race of people that turns against it is just so much useless trash that must be destroyed. Our New Order is indefeasible. But when the dogmas of my faith began to crumble, when I realized that these crimes had been committed in the name of a lie, then it was that I could find no place for myself, and like Cain I began to wander over the face of the earth."

He tugged at his collar as though it were strangling him, then hit the table with his fist. "But why am I telling you all this since you are not the man for me? You are not the man, Father Vikenty. You have no discipline!"

Long years of experience in the confessional had taught Father Vikenty to discern a man's motivations, and he knew that there was a good deal of flaunting of sin in Boukashov's confession; yet he had listened to it with closed eyes, trying to place himself in the

man's position, to imbue himself with his sufferings. But now, with Boukashov's last outburst, the compassion he had felt gave way to sudden contrition. "Yes, I know. As a priest I am a failure. But why look to me or to any other man, dear friend? Why not look within yourself, at that spark which was born there and made you dimly perceive an everlasting principle? That is your living link with Jesus Christ our Lord. I swear to God it is."

"Oh, leave Jesus Christ out of it! Your way of believing in Him amounts to mesmeromania. And I haven't escaped one form of mesmeromania to plunge into another, out of the frying pan into the fire."

"But you don't have to believe the way I do or any other man does. Just believe in what He taught and demonstrated. That's all that's necessary."

"And to what avail? All He aimed at was to make slaves of us in the end. So what's the difference?"

"What are you saying, Boukashov?" Father Vikenty's chest began to heave with sudden indignation. "There is all the difference in the world! It's one thing to give oneself of one's own free will to an everlasting Kingdom, and quite another to be enslaved by that which in the end must perish and rot. No, say what you like, there are only two ways, and you know it. Only two ways of thinking, two ways of feeling, and we must choose between them. Yes, between Christ and antichrist."

Boukashov threw up his hand in derision. "That, my dear Father Vikenty, is mystical nonsense. I have no use for such abstruse dramatizations."

"But it isn't, it isn't!" Father Vikenty leaned forward in his chair, the palms of his hands outstretched as though to offer his interlocutor everything he had. "It's so clear it might be written on that wall. It's like white and black, like day and night, like the flame of life and the fire of destruction," he cried in a sudden flow of oratory. "And it all boils down to this: a man was taken up into a high mountain and shown all the kingdoms of the world and rejected them, and Jesus Christ came down. And a man was taken up into a high mountain and shown all the kingdoms of the world and accepted them, and Joseph Stalin came down."

They stared into each other's eyes for a full minute, and the silence in the kitchen was complete. Then Boukashov stirred. He frowned and shook his head, chasing away surrender; and then he smiled. "You have a strong head, Father Vikenty. You never show the effects of drink. True, you behave childishly at times, but I must concede that you can also say some interesting things. I will think over what you just said. And perhaps some day, when we are both sober, I will come back for another talk, but now I am tired and I want to go to bed."

They stood up.

"You've got a strong head, too," Father Vikenty returned the compliment. "So have a last one for the road. The night is cold."

They clinked glasses and drank in sudden mutual satisfaction; and the alcohol racing through their veins made them want to show off and outdo one another in magnanimity.

Boukashov had put on his coat and Father Vikenty came up close to him. "Ech, Boukashov dear friend, we have both sinned a lot. You have a hard road ahead of you, and I am an unworthy priest. But let me give you my blessing all the same."

He made a broad sign of the cross, and Boukashov, remembering his early childhood and his devout grandmother, accepted the blessing with bowed head, and then, after a second's hesitation, touched the priest's hand with his lips.

For once Father Vikenty felt neither embarrassment nor confusion. Here was a second victory in one night. A new elation took possession of him, and with it the first prickings of desire. Deliberately deceiving himself yet undeceived, he thought of the woman downstairs as a means to further test his moral strength. And in order to achieve this, he spoke to Boukashov of the possible dangers of kidnaping.

"I don't like the idea of your walking the streets alone at night," he said. "You never can tell. I think I had better come with you and help you find a cab." Dragoon pricked up his ears and jumped to his feet, wagging his tail-end in pleasurable anticipation. "No, Dragoonushka, no, you stay here. I'll be right back." And as Dragoon sank to his mattress, his eyes half closed in disappointment, Father Vikenty quickly looked the other way. If Dragoon

were with me when I saw her, he thought, it would be Dragoon, not I, who would have saved me from temptation.

He glanced at the woman's door as he descended the stairs, but the door was closed. "Ech-ech! So there is to be no temptation after all," he sighed, smothering a deeper disappointment. Boukashov meanwhile was protesting, urging Father Vikenty to go back to his apartment, assuring him that he ran no danger and didn't need his protection. But Father Vikenty had become obdurate. He said no, he would see Boukashov safely to a cab.

At the corner of the street they saw a cruising taxi and Father Vikenty hailed it. When Boukashov got in, he slammed the door and waved a cheerful farewell. But on his way back to the house he retarded his steps, his heart contracting in a mixture of hope, and fear, and shame.

He saw her against the dung-colored wall of the hallway, and a pulse began to pound in his temple. She was standing outside her door, her hips outlined under her green kimona, her bare legs grotesquely thin and white. He clutched the banister and forced himself to climb two steps, never once taking his eyes off the woman. She passed her tongue over her lips. His body climbed another step, leaving his will behind.

And it was then that she drew her kimona apart. Lechery, lechery and abomination, he almost shouted aloud. Burn your hand, gouge your eye! But even as the last shreds of conscience cried out in him, he was retracing his steps; and the woman backed into her room, and he went in after her.

3

THERE WERE two things the next morning of which Father Vikenty, fast asleep in his bed, snoring, remained ignorant for a while: he did not know that Ivan Ivanovitch had entered the room, holding in his hand the visiting card on which "and Dragoon Vikentievitch Kadilov" had been scribbled; nor did he know that Dragoon was in bed with him. Dragoon was lying on his side, his head resting on the pillow, his eye fixed on the church warden's outraged countenance.

Ivan Ivanovitch was so overcome he didn't utter a word, but the full force of his outrage must have made itself felt, for Father Vikenty moved uneasily in his sleep. He swallowed a snore and smacked his lips, and the noise brought back consciousness, although his eyes remained closed. He moved an arm and it came into contact with a warm body. Instantly all the memories of the night before came surging up, and he felt cold all over with terror, thinking that the woman was asleep beside him. But his touch had set Dragoon into frantic motion: he scrambled out of bed, running like a streak to his mattress, where he sat down on his haunches, shivering a little with shame and remorse.

Father Vikenty opened his eyes and saw Ivan Ivanovitch's angry scowl which seemed to spread even to his cauliflower ear — it wriggled slightly in indignation. With a furious shrug the little man stuck the visiting card into the pocket of his overcoat, then went to the desk and opened the top right drawer. It had all happened before, it was like a tedious recurring dream, and at any other time Father Vikenty would have smiled or laughed, but now he felt too mortified, too crushed. And only one thought kept spinning slowly through his brain: Let him go, let him fly to my lord Sofrony, and may my punishment come swiftly.

After picking a fresh visiting card out of the drawer Ivan Ivanovitch left, still without a word, for which Father Vikenty was grateful. He got out of bed and walked unsteadily across the room, not daring to look at the icons. In the bathroom he soaped and scrubbed himself for almost half an hour; and another half hour went by before he got dressed and settled down in the kitchen to his breakfast. By then Dragoon was all but crawling on his belly in contrition and repentance, and the sight of him so pitiful and humble took some of the numbness out of Father Vikenty's soul. He ventured a smile; but it lacked its usual kindly sparkle and seemed to depress Dragoon even more. "Stop tormenting yourself, Dragoon. You got into my bed and disgraced me, and now you feel full of shame. You know the difference between what's good and what's bad and that's why you are a good dog. Your misdeeds are but errors, not sins. But I, who have been given the ability to differentiate between 'good' and 'better' and between 'bad' and 'worse,' am the foulest of sinners, for I deliberately chose the worst. Yes, Dragoonushka, that's what I did." More than that he could not bring himself to say, not even to Dragoon; yet anxious to restore Dragoon's good spirits, he gave him a piece of ham, which the dog snatched out of his fingers and swallowed at a gulp. And Father Vikenty shook his head, the same wan smile on his lips. "Ech, Dragoonushka, how often have I told you? Your gluttony will be your undoing, mark my words."

"But who am I to say this? Hasn't my gluttony, a different, a more bestial form of gluttony, been my undoing?" He went into the next room, his eyes still avoiding the icons. "Filth, filth is upon me," he kept repeating, "no matter how well scrubbed my body may be." And it wasn't the sin of fornication that he was ruing: the sin he had so easily, willingly forgiven in others but which in himself he had always abhorred and had withstood for many years in order to glorify the spirit. No, not fornication, but something far more devastating: a silent, monstrous force, which seemed to have sprung from cavernous depths in which it had lain stored, restrained; all that was animal in him for millions of years back leaping forth to swallow the spirit which had dared to say, I will go my way, and my way leads in the opposite direction.

And now no punishment seemed severe or harsh enough to expiate his vileness. He thought of long hours of prayer, of severe fastings, of pilgrimages, of his possible removal from his post as rector of the Church of the Transfiguration; but even that, somehow, did not seem to be the thing. His sin had to be wrenched out of him in order to cleanse him. And it was at this point that the idea of a public confession first came to him. "Yes, tomorrow," he cried, "after Divine Service!" But even as he said this he realised that to rush into it without waiting for the Archbishop to lay a penance on him would be but another form of vanity: it would amount to self-deception, to an evasion of punishment, to self-allurement even. Yet the temptation was strong, and a mean fear lurked behind it that he might be deprived altogether of the public confession which he now craved. The wishfulness of his nature came to his rescue, for the more he pondered over it the more certain he became that it would be just this sort of penance that the Archbishop would exact of him. He could almost hear the Archbishop's voice: "Make a public confession of your sins, Father Vikenty. Let your parishioners be your judges. Let them decide whether they want such a sinner for a priest." Yes, that's what the Archbishop was bound to say, for what greater punishment could there be than this?

The thought brought a certain appeasement to his conscience. He had dreaded the office of vespers, but now he went through it without trembling too much over his unworthiness every time he invoked the name of God. And later, when Ivan Ivanovitch approached him, his eyes secret and withdrawn, to tell him that Archbishop Sofrony wished to see him at four the next afternoon and that Mr. Owtch would be glad to drive him out to the monastery in his car, he felt nothing but relief; and his nod was almost carefree, even though the offer of a ride with Mr. Owtch meant that Ivan Ivanovitch would probably be coming along too.

He saw Natasha at the other end of the church. He knew at once by the look on her face that she was anxious to speak to him alone, and he hurriedly left Ivan Ivanovitch to join her. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining feverishly, and there was a note of unnatural exhilaration in her voice as she said, "Batiushka,

I know this will make you happy. I have decided to marry Johnnie!"

For an instant he remained very still, wishing that this news had come to him at any other time but this, when he could have rejoiced over it with all his natural gusto. And Natasha, seeing an unusual reticence in him, looked at him in surprise. "Aren't you glad, Batiushka?"

He blushed over the things that lay concealed at the bottom of his conscience. "Natasha my dear, I am happy about you and Johnnie, even if I can't make a lot of noise about it right now. Surely you must know how happy I am." He saw a large diamond ring on her finger and raised her hand to look at it. "Johnnie's?"

"Yes. And guess what else he gave me. His car! He said he had had me in mind when he bought it. He intended to give it to me all along."

Father Vikenty smiled. "Yes, I knew that."

"You did? Did he tell you?"

"No, no. I just guessed."

"Darling Batiushka, you always see through things, don't you? How I wish my father were like you. But perhaps you have already guessed what I've got to tell you next. It's not all rosy. Today I told my father everything about Johnnie, about his origin and so on, and he — Oh well, you know him! He said if I married Johnnie, he would never see me again."

She didn't give Father Vikenty time to put in a word. Her chin shot out in revolt. "But I will marry Johnnie all the same, and my father can lump it. I'm tired of his possessiveness, his tyranny. His love is worse than hatred!" She looked the other way to hide the tears which had suddenly welled up in her eyes. "It will have to be a very small wedding," she said in a very small voice. She cleared her throat, annoyed at herself for this display of emotion. "Very few will be told about it. I won't even tell Mamma. No, no, I won't. It would make her too unhappy. She would either come to the wedding and then have a dreadful time with Father, or she would stay home and be utterly miserable. Poor Mamma has enough to contend with as it is." She tried to blink away the tears that were rising to her eyes once more, and her upper lip

trembled slightly; but she squared her shoulders, and her words came rushing forth with redoubled speed. "Johnnie's parents are away, and it's just as well. We will let them know later. So you see, there will be hardly anyone present. My cousin Nikita, the one we call 'The Carrot,' and Yuri Bourkevitch will hold the crown over my head, and Johnnie will have his brother-in-law, Ogden Post, and Jerry Wilson to hold his. And of course there will be Millicent — I love Millicent — and Sandra. Nothing will keep Sandra away from Yuri, not even Aunt Ella's displeasure, though if you ask me, there is no displeasure there at all, except perhaps in Sandra's imagination. Aunt Ella wants to see me married to Johnnie, and she has set her heart on getting Sandra married to Yuri because he is a Russian and because there is no one else. Well for once I'm glad things are working out Aunt Ella's way. But I must warn you, Batiushka, Sandra and Yuri and the others have been sworn to secrecy, and I must swear you to secrecy too."

She stepped closer to him and lowered her voice, anxious not to be overheard by others; for just at that moment Madame Pishnik passed by, waving to Natasha, and Miss Katastrofoff, as usual, was wandering somewhat aimlessly about the church, and Miss Klüpfel was locking her candle desk, and Ivan Ivanovitch was spying on them all from the steps of the altar.

"Johnnie is being sent abroad on the second of March," Natasha whispered, "so we decided to get married next Sunday — a week from tomorrow, I mean. That will give us barely ten days together, for you see, Batiushka, I will have to stay behind and join him later."

There was so much Father Vikenty wanted to tell her about herself, about her father, about Johnnie, but words did not come. He lowered his eyes, embarrassed by his own inarticulateness. "The day you have chosen, Natasha dear, is the first Sunday in Lent. You need a special dispensation to get married during Lent, you know."

"Of course, I forgot about that! Well, I'll drive out tomorrow afternoon and get that dispensation from Archbishop Sofrony."

She made a little grimace, for she had never liked the Arch-

bishop; but Father Vikenty's face brightened for the first time. "You will? Then perhaps you will take me with you? My Lord Sofrony has ordered me to appear before him tomorrow at four o'clock."

His words sounded ominous. Natasha glanced at him questioningly but refrained from any comment. She suggested having lunch together after divine service and then driving out to the monastery. And Father Vikenty, no matter how hard he tried, was unable to suppress a smug look as he told Ivan Ivanovitch that the services of Mr. Owtch would not be required.

4

THE SKIES next day were overcast, and mists hung over the hills of Connecticut as the big white Cadillac sped to the monastery, with Natasha at the wheel, and Johnnie beside her, and Father Vikenty and Punty in the back seat.

The cheerless day did little to dispel Father Vikenty's nervous tension, a tension he experienced every time he was about to meet Archbishop Sofrony but which on this occasion might have become acute if Punty hadn't been there to take his mind off the forthcoming interview. The little black and white Boston terrier, his interest torn between the window and the priest, stood for minutes on end with one front paw pressed against the windowpane and the other folded daintily on itself, gazing at the rushing landscape; then, suddenly remembering his traveling companion, he would precipitate himself on Father Vikenty as if to tell him what he had seen. And Father Vikenty would smile and stroke Punty's round head and say, "Yes, Poontic, yes. Connecticut is a beautiful state."

Shortly before four the car turned off the main road and traveled along a narrow twisting lane. A few minutes later it passed through wide open gates, coming to a stop in a strange little world, in which old Russia seemed to have been superimposed on New England. Father Vikenty noticed the wonder in Johnnie's eyes as they took in the whole place. The big two-story house in the center, surrounded by a number of outbuildings, all of them white and trim and cottagelike, with green shutters and brick chimneys, bore all the marks of a prosperous and orderly New England farm; yet the whole picture was thrown out of focus by one solitary figure — that of a long-haired, bearded monk in a thick brown cassock and a pointed monk's cap, who stood in front of one of

the outbuildings, squinting at the newcomers not with suspicion but with a kind of detached puzzlement, as though not sure how he himself had come to be there in the first place. And the main house, square and white, which in a not too distant past must have housed some well-to-do New England farmer and his family and felt proud at being the sole center of this little universe, now looked dwarfed by the wing which had sprung out of its side. Not an ordinary wing, not an annex, or an extension, or an ell, but a church, crowned by a blue, onion-shaped dome and a long glistening cross; so that the house itself, like Adam on his first awakening, seemed to be muttering in dismay, Oh Lord! What have you created out of my rib?

A warm, rich, appetizing smell of freshly baked bread — the black bread for which the monastery had become renowned — hit Father Vikenty's nose as he and the others got out of the car; and Punty tugged at his leash, drawn to that smell as if by a magnet.

"Oh, Johnnie, I must show you the bakery," Natasha cried. "Why don't you go and see the Archbishop, Batiushka? We'll be waiting for you in the entrance hall when you get through."

She went to one of the smaller buildings, with Johnnie at her side and Punty still tugging at his leash, and Father Vikenty felt suddenly alone. The last contact with the outside world seemed to be receding with them, leaving him to face a still unknown but irrevocable sentence. He closed his eyes for an instant in a short but ardent prayer: "Oh Lord, don't let my fear and my awe render me dumb."

He went up the steps of the main building and into a long dark hall, at the far end of which a big door opened upon the interior of the church. Father Vikenty could see a section of the iconostasis and a couple of icons, with lighted image-lamps hanging in front of them. Behind him a row of chairs stood in line with the wall, and further on a table, loaded with religious pamphlets and leaflets and small icons and little silver crosses; but except for these furnishings, the hall was bare, silent and still as a tomb. Father Vikenty felt oppressed. He turned to a door at the left of the main entrance, his nervous tension rising; for that door, he knew, led to the Archbishop's private apartment.

And presently the door opened and an elderly monk — the Archbishop's personal attendant — appeared on the threshold, his eyes downcast, doubtless unwilling, Father Vikenty thought, to disclose the censure and disapproval that lay behind them. "His Eminence is waiting for you," he said in a voice at once faint and austere, inviting Father Vikenty with an unobtrusive movement of his hand to follow him.

They entered a large and amply furnished waiting room, with rugs on the floor, and two bright windows, and a cluster of icons in the far right-hand corner of the room, in front of which the light of an image lamp flickered faintly. Father Vikenty crossed himself and bowed to the icons, hoping that his guide would tell him to sit down and wait. But the monk opened another door, indicating with another unobtrusive movement of his hand that from now on Father Vikenty was to proceed on his own.

Heavily, as though dragging his own body behind him, Father Vikenty stepped into the Archbishop's private chamber, scarcely larger than a closet, and stopped. The heat in this small room, emanating from a large kerosene stove, was stifling, but Father Vikenty was aware of only one thing — his wildly beating heart. He hardly remembered how he performed the prescribed genuflections and moved forward to receive a blessing. Then he was back again near the door, standing like a fool, he thought, yet unable to do anything about it, although by this time he was beginning to dimly perceive a few objects: a narrow cot, a large crucifix against a whitewashed wall, a window with no curtains to adorn it, a plain kitchen table serving as a desk, and under the table a small foot in an old moccasin, protruding from under a black robe made of some thick coarse fabric. The foot began to tap the floor, and somehow that soft measured tapping, which seemed to be demanding, exacting something of him though what he did not know, drained his mind of all rational thought; a sudden panic seized upon him, rooting him to one spot, where he stood, unable to move, or think, or even breathe. Fortunately a second foot appeared from under the robe a moment later, hesitated, then softly scratched the ankle of its twin. And this homely gesture broke through his paralysis. He felt himself breathing once more,

and thinking; and his foolish terror vanished, leaving only his guilty conscience to weigh upon him. He sat down in a chair, to which the Archbishop's crippled arthritic hand was now pointing, and for the first time raised his eyes to the prelate's face.

The man who had both bullied and beguiled him into becoming ordained as a priest was now but a shrunken, wizened shadow of his former self, with sunken temples, sharp cheekbones, and a still sharper nose, over which the thin colorless skin lay tightly drawn as over a drum, while a streak of yellow in his thin white beard and a net of small purple veins high up on his forehead, under the plain monk's cap which he was wearing, provided the only touch of color in an otherwise ghostly countenance that seemed more like a relic than a living being. And his steel-gray eyes — those eyes that once had glistened so strangely at the sight of Father Vikenty's powerful young body prostrated at his feet — had now grown heavy and ponderous: the eyes of a man who had wrestled long and painfully with himself, his mind, his intellect gathering and imbuing the things his heart had been unable to absorb.

Pity stirred somewhere deep within Father Vikenty's heart at the formidable sight of this man who had gone through a lifetime of frustration in a vain effort to attain that which was often granted to little children and the simplest of men. And yet, wasn't the effort in itself admirable? Didn't it make of him a sort of pillar of light with its iridescence turned inward, not for the salvation of others perhaps, but for their edification? Such thoughts traveled swiftly through Father Vikenty's brain, yet as usual he could not bring himself to meet the prelate's eyes, nor was he able to stare back at them as he sometimes did when his conscience was clear. Instead, he lowered his own eyes, guiltily casting them to the right and to the left, while the Archbishop's eyes followed them, chased them, as though trying to catch and seize them in a strange game of hide-and-seek.

And finally the Archbishop spoke: "I had hoped that wisdom and a moral balance would come to you with the years, Father Vikenty, without my having to lay upon you the heavy hand of punishment. But apparently that is not to be. You persist in your

unbridled ways, stubbornly lending a deaf ear to the voice of God and the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ." His voice was surprisingly firm and strong. It came to Father Vikenty almost as a shock after his lengthy contemplation of the old man's frail body; and it fell on anything but deaf ears, for Father Vikenty was listening to every word with reverence and awe, his head bowed, his hands folded on his knees. No Pope was ever more infallible in the eyes of the clergy of Rome than Archbishop Sofrony was in Father Vikenty's eyes at that moment — a man set by the hand of God to be his judge.

"I won't enumerate your past offenses," the Archbishop went on. "They were fully covered in my letter, which I had hoped would bring you to your senses. But you chose to disregard my warnings and my reprimands. Again you wrote your dog's name on your visiting card, as though he were your son. Again you went to a wrestling match and gave way to unseemly boisterousness. And again you got drunk and allowed your dog to share your bed. But in your blindness, wretched priest, you seem to have forgotten the words of our Saviour: 'There is nothing hid that shall not be manifested; neither was anything kept secret, but it should come abroad.' "

Nothing hid, nothing kept secret, Father Vikenty repeated to himself in trepidation. Yes, everything, everything will come out into the open in my public confession, for surely that's what my lord Sofrony must have in mind. But my lord Sofrony, unaware of Father Vikenty's reflections, went on speaking in the same firm, strong, almost detached tone of voice: "And so, Father Vikenty, now that I know how obdurate you are, I find it my painful duty to make good my word and lay a severe penance on you."

"Wait, Your Eminence! You know nothing about me. Nothing!" The cry was torn out of Father Vikenty's breast. The Archbishop raised an eyebrow, but Father Vikenty gave him no time to speak. With a heavy thud he fell to his knees. "Hear me, Your Eminence, hear me, my lord Archbishop! Hear my confession, for I am the worst, the vilest of sinners, my lord. The things you were told about me will seem like child's play after you have heard what I have to confess. And let me start from the beginning.

Your letter, my lord, did not enumerate all my transgressions. It made no mention of my assault on Mr. Owtch. I attacked the man in a blind rage, using the most abusive language. And because that crime of mine had been omitted, I flew into another rage and threw away your letter. Yes, I threw it away and let my dog tear it to shreds. But that is not all. Oh, if only that were all! You spoke of my dog sharing my bed with me. But, my lord, I befouled myself not with my dog but with a woman. Sottishly I squandered myself with her. Everything the devil had whispered to me throughout the years I did to her that night. Like a shameless dog I copulated, my lord Archbishop, but with premeditation, yes, with premeditation. Oh, how can I ever expiate such a sin? Show me no mercy, Your Eminence, I beseech you, show me no mercy." And for the third time in his life he prostrated himself at his bishop's feet.

How long he lay on the floor he did not know. His whole being was shuddering. Although he had prepared himself for the ordeal which he felt sure he would have to face, now that the sentence was about to be passed, the thought of having to bare his soul in front of all his parishioners filled him with sudden terror. And he lay there, trembling. It was the Archbishop's voice that put an end to it: "Get up, Father Vikenty, and sit down."

Mechanically, without a thought now in his head, he obeyed. Large drops of perspiration were running down his cheeks and neck, and he mopped his face with his handkerchief, muttering absent-mindedly, "Forgive me, Your Eminence, for sweating so."

And in the silence of the little room the Archbishop's eyes rested upon him, while Father Vikenty stirred uneasily in his seat. Then the Archbishop said, "So you let your dog tear my letter to shreds?" And again, half to himself, "So you let your dog tear my letter to shreds."

That was all. Father Vikenty sat gaping in bewilderment. Would the Archbishop say nothing more? Was the gravest of his sins of no consequence to this man? Was the fate of his own letter his sole concern, or did he feel that with confessions made and the heart spent, the rest had best be passed over in silence? Father Vikenty did not know what to think. He waited, holding

his breath. And presently he saw that the old man's lips were moving, though no sound reached his ears. He leaned forward in anxious expectation. Now, at last — he knew it instinctively — his long awaited punishment was about to fall. And into the silence, the Archbishop dropped these words: "Get rid of your dog, Father Vikenty. Therein will lie your penance."

So unprepared was Father Vikenty for this that he met the Archbishop's eyes with a blank stare. "Huh?" he said, then quickly apologised, "Forgive me, Your Eminence, but I don't think I heard you."

"I said get rid of your dog. Therein will lie your penance."

"What? You want me to kill him?"

"I didn't say kill him. I said get rid of him."

This time Father Vikenty understood all too well. Beads of perspiration stood out again on his forehead. "My lord Sofrony, what are you saying? It's me you've got to punish, not my dog!"

But even as he said this he knew that he must submit, that he had wanted no quarter and must ask for none. Yet the thought of abandoning Dragoon to the care of strangers was like a hideous laceration. It tore right through his entrails, and for a moment he thought he was going to vomit. Hardly aware of what he was doing, he cried out in a low, rumbling voice, "God will never allow this to happen. He couldn't allow it."

The Archbishop closed his eyes and munched his lips, debating something within himself. And now his well-trained intellect stepped in where his heart had always been absent, and in his own way he tried to soothe Father Vikenty's pain. "You speak of God as though you were speaking of me, or of yourself, or of any other man. You liken Him to yourself, attributing to Him your own logic, your own reasoning, your own will, and that is a sin which always hits back at you." There was little consolation in these words, but there was so much truth in them, and they hit Father Vikenty so squarely in the face, that all he could do was to mutter in confusion, "Oh, I am sinful, I am stupid, so help me God."

And the Archbishop went on, "You are not stupid, Father Vikenty, nor are you perhaps as sinful as you think, but you are unwise, and the unwise can sometimes do more damage than the sinful. Yes, that is something you still have to learn, for you have

been endowed with the harmlessness of the dove, but you lack the wisdom of the serpent." His eyes seemed to be looking through Father Vikenty now, while his twisted, crippled fingers touched the beads of a rosary he carried wound around his wrist.

"You've had a hard life, Father Vikenty," he said. "And so have I. We've both been lonely men. In your loneliness you attached yourself to this dog with a passion and a possessiveness which like your nature knew no bounds. And now you grieve over the forthcoming separation; you say, 'It is cruel to make a dog suffer,' and you grieve. But it's because you have known no bounds that all this suffering has come to you. And yet I would gladly change places with you, Father Vikenty. Yes, even at this very moment I would. I have had no attachments in life, no emotional consolations, and what have I got in my loneliness but the dreadful responsibility of making decisions which involve and affect the consciences of others? Rulers and some statesmen know what that means, but even they know it only in part, for they guide the political, the economical, the physical destinies of man, whereas bishops must guide the church and its faithful into eternity. And believe me, Father Vikenty, to do this in these days of conflicts and feuds can be devastating. You should thank the Lord God that you have only your own decisions to make, for you don't know how lucky you are, indeed you don't — "

He remained very still for a while, his eyes closed; he might have been asleep, or dead, or just an effigy of himself. Was it the weight of his responsibilities, or a sudden regret for the things he had missed in life, that had plunged him into such deep absorption? Father Vikenty could not tell. Yet whatever the Archbishop's cogitations might have been they seemed to have softened him, for his face looked less severe in repose. Gazing at it, a ray of hope stirred in Father Vikenty's heart. Perhaps now, this very moment, the old man will open his eyes and say, "Make a public penance of your sins, Father Vikenty, and keep your dog." What bliss, what inexpressible bliss it would be to hear those words fall from the old man's lips! For the sake of it Father Vikenty was prepared to undergo a hundred penances, a thousand humiliations.

But when at length the Archbishop opened his eyes and spoke,

his voice sounded harsh. "I warn you, Father Vikenty, I'm tired of the anarchy of your nature and of all the things it causes you to do. Yes, I am tired of it, and I won't stand for it any longer. If ever I get another complaint, if you ever offend your parishioners in any way, I will lock you up in this monastery for six months and you will bake our bread. Yes, that is my warning for the future. As for the present — I suppose you will want to find a good home for this dog. So I will give you three weeks in which to do it." He glanced at a calendar on his desk, mumbling to himself, "First, second, third Sunday in Lent"; then for the last time he fixed Father Vikenty with his heavy eyes: "By Sunday the eighth of March that dog must no longer be with you." And he raised his hand to signify that the audience was over.

Something in Father Vikenty died. Like an automaton he stood up, his own voice reaching him as though it were a stranger's. " Your Eminence, Princess Natasha Tverskoy and her fiancé are outside, waiting. They want a dispensation to get married next Sunday. The government is sending the young man abroad."

The Archbishop's voice sounded almost peevish now, like that of a child, complaining, "Oh, it's so cold out there!" But the old Prince was one of his staunchest supporters; he had a great regard for him and therefore did not like to refuse to see Natasha. "Give me my plaid," he said.

Only Father Vikenty's body, not he himself, responded to the command. He picked up a tartan plaid from the cot and slipped it round the Archbishop's shoulders; then followed him through the waiting room into the long dark hall, bright now with electric lights, for it had grown almost dark outside.

Natasha and Johnnie were seated on two chairs near the wall, with Punty between them. When the Archbishop came in, they jumped to their feet, forgetting about the dog, and Natasha advanced, her hands cupped in the prescribed way to receive the Archbishop's blessing. Then she introduced Johnnie, who shook hands with the old man. But just as Natasha was about to state her case, Punty, doubtless sore at being overlooked, ran in the direction of the open door that lead into the church, dragging his leash behind him. He ran with swift little steps, his eyes half

closed and his ears folded back so as not to see or hear anything, as little dogs will often do when they know they are being naughty.

A look of horror came into the Archbishop's face. "Don't let that dog get into the church," he snapped. "Take him away."

Natasha laughed. She ran after Punty and picked him up. "But he is a baptized dog," she cried.

"Baptized? What do you mean, baptized?"

She came forward, still holding Punty, who was panting, his bright red tongue curled up inside his wide open mouth. "Why yes, my lord. Father Vikenty baptized him." She was referring of course to the time when Father Vikenty had sprinkled the three dogs with holy water, but she was too full of mischief, and of annoyance, to explain what she meant.

The muscles of the Archbishop's face, or rather that thin, tightly drawn skin of his began to twitch. He glanced first at Natasha, then at Father Vikenty. At any other time Father Vikenty would have felt mortified; he would have explained everything, stumbling over his words in his embarrassment. But now he was in too great a shock to care. He had heard what Natasha had said, but the words had hardly registered in his brain.

Natasha handed Punty to Johnnie, saying blandly, "I don't think the Archbishop cares for dogs. Please take Punty back to the car." And in order to console Punty, who was looking rather guilty by now, and to needle the Archbishop one last time before attending to her business, she patted Punty's head, saying, "You poor good baptized doggie."

And it was characteristic of her to consider that everything should be forgotten once the joke was over: if the old man didn't have enough sense of humor to take it, it was just too bad. She turned to the Archbishop as though nothing untoward had happened, and began to explain in her hurried, half-excited way why she wanted a dispensation to marry Johnnie during Lent.

The Archbishop's face had frozen into immobility, but that intellect, that brain of his, trained to enact forgiveness as a primary Christian virtue, was making a supreme effort; and before she got halfway through, he interrupted her, somewhat impa-

tiently. "Yes, yes, I know. Father Vikenty told me. You may get married next Sunday, if you wish."

He blessed her from afar with a broad sign of the cross. The elderly monk, who had guided Father Vikenty to the Archbishop's door, appeared from around a corner and hovered over his master, at once a devoted body servant and a watchful guardian; then he escorted the prelate to the inner apartments with low bows. And when the door closed behind them, Natasha broke into a soft gurgle of a laugh. "Well, that was easy. And everything was as it should be — bearded lady-in-waiting and all."

But her laughter died on her lips the moment she looked into Father Vikenty's eyes and saw how dead they were. Instantly she knew that something dreadful had happened, and all her love for him, all her tenderness came flowing forth. She slipped her hand into his arm, pressing her cheek against his shoulder. "Darling Batiushka, don't forget the world is still full of miracles."

And then she led him to the car, and whispered something into Johnnie's ear. And Johnnie got behind the wheel, while she settled down with Father Vikenty in the back seat, Punty curled up between them. And she took Father Vikenty's hand in hers and held it. Nothing more was said, but the warmth of her affection was soothing, and by the time they reached the main road, his head drooped to his chest, and he fell asleep.

5

IT WAS PERHAPS unfortunate that Natasha should have mentioned the word "miracles," for it helped to set Father Vikenty on a course in which his natural overabundance of optimism turned into a sort of spiritual recklessness. At first, on awakening in the morning, he had felt almost resigned. In the car the night before he had told Natasha about Dragoon, and her outburst of indignation against Archbishop Sofrony had not been helpful (she had sworn as much like a trooper as any well-bred young woman could); but when her anger had subsided and the irrevocableness of his sentence lay open in her mind, she had made a constructive suggestion: "How about our place in Connecticut? I think Dragoon would be happy there, and I'm sure Mamma would be delighted to have him — as you know, this spring she is planning to move to the country for good. And I can say one thing for my father, he is always kind to animals."

The idea had been a pleasing one; it had actually brought a certain attenuation of his sorrow. He had gone to bed, turning it over in his mind, seeing, as he fell asleep, visions of a bucolic Dragoon, sniffing at a variety of little bugs and occasionally chasing a rabbit. And on arising in the morning he had said, "Yes, the Princess! She is the only human being to whom I would entrust Dragoon."

But when he settled down in his armchair for a last glass of tea, everything changed; and Dragoon was the cause of it — the way he looked at Father Vikenty and the way he sighed as he flopped down at his feet It was as if Dragoon had done it on purpose in order to rekindle in his master the pain and distress which Natasha's suggestion had temporarily assuaged. "Oh, Dragoonushka, don't turn my soul inside out!" And even as Father

Vikenty said this something within him locked, not in revolt, nor even in protest, but in silent, inescapable determination never to give up Dragoon alive. He was not aware, not even fully conscious of the true nature of this sudden determination, nor did he run it to earth by facing it and saying, "This is what you really are." And because of his failure to do this, the determination grew, cloaking itself in mysticism with such rapidity and insidiousness that in the end he was no longer able to distinguish effect from its primary cause.

He started by arguing it out in this way: "God loves all His children, and that is an incontrovertible truth. Dragoon is God's child, and God has placed him in my care to love and to cherish, and I must therefore make him happy and protect him from all suffering. Yes! But then, my lord Sofrony is also God's child, and God has placed me in his care to be taught and guided, and my lord Sofrony has decreed that Dragoon and I must part. Oh — ! It all seems full of contradictions, yet any fool knows that God isn't a trader or a dealer. It's here that the lack of discernment lies." He tapped his forehead, and the touch of his finger gave birth to a new trend of thought. Wasn't it perhaps God's will that Dragoon's life should be sacrificed? For surely that would be infinitely kinder than to subject Dragoon to utter, hopeless desolation, which only a faithful dog deprived of his master could feel. And oddly enough, although it made him shudder, the thought of Dragoon's death as a mystical sacrifice got a firm hold in Father Vikenty's mind; and from then on, like a glider, his reasoning took to the wind.

What was it Natasha had said? "Don't forget the world is still full of miracles?" Yes, of course; and if one believed in God, one had to believe in His miracles. Hadn't God tested Abraham by ordering him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac? And hadn't the Angel of the Lord stayed Abraham's hand? And hadn't Isaac been exchanged with a ram? God put Abraham through a supreme test, and Abraham never wavered, never lost his trust in God. Of course, he — Father Vikenty — was not worthy of such a test, nor could he hope that in his case an Angel of the Lord would intervene at the crucial moment. This last thought made him wince; and questions began to crop up in his mind: where and how could

such a sacrifice be performed? Surely not in a New York veterinary's office! So unseemly somehow, so unbiblical! Then, shamefaced, he shook his head. His test was so small, so insignificant compared to Abraham's, and already he was full of doubts, asking questions and demanding answers. "Fool," he cried, "don't you know that Providence always has a higher purpose? This sacrifice may be necessary in order to purify you, to prepare you for that which has to come." And it was at this point that Dragoon's fate became linked in his mind with the miracle of reconciliation which he was convinced would soon come to pass for the glorification of his church. "And perhaps," he added deceivingly, "my hand will be stayed after all."

For the last few minutes he had been pacing up and down the room. Now he stopped in front of the icons and crossed himself. "Into thy hands, Oh Lord. Thy will be done."

The telephone rang on his desk. He hurried across the room and picked up the receiver; and the Princess's voice reached him, clear and distinct, saying the things which a few mniutes before he had longed to hear: "Good morning, Batiushka. Natasha just called me and told me about Dragoon. I can't tell you how upset I am. I know exactly how you must feel. And of course I'll be glad to take Dragoon, and I promise not to let Schnitzel assert any priority or precedence over him."

Had she left it at that, he might have succumbed, for his involutions were still in their infancy and he felt deeply moved by her kindness and generosity. But she went on: "Of course I'm not moving to the country until late in April, but I'll tell you what I'll do, if it meets with your approval. There is a farm near our place. The people who own it look after our house when we are away. I can arrange for Dragoon to stay with them for two months until I get there and take him over myself. The farmer and his wife are perfect dears, I'm sure they'll take excellent care of him."

Strangers? he thought. Two whole months of agonizing loneliness among strangers? And it wasn't he himself who said this but that dogged determination in him. Nor did it occur to him for a single moment that in that voice, which was coming to him now over the wire, might lie the staying of his hand. He thanked

the Princess. He said he would think the matter over, knowing full well that he was not going to accept her offer. And with the clicking of the receiver in his ear all that had been up to then only intricate ratiocination suddenly took root in his mind.

He got several other offers in the next few days. Ivan Ivanovitch was the first to come, with the preposterous suggestion of giving Dragoon to Mr. Owtch. "Have you been eating henbane or what?" cried Father Vikenty, and sent him packing.

Madame Pishnik came next. She said, pressing her hands to her head and flinging them out in a gesture of complete surrender, "For you, dear Batiushka, I would do anything. I'll gladly take Dragoon. He can even share my bed." Then it was Miss Katastrofoff who said, hesitantly, "I would if I could — Oh, no, no, no, that's not at all the way to put it — I'm so seldom at home, you know — But if you find no other place for Dragoon, I have a little closet — " And the Professor sent a laconic message: "My son Yuri would like to have the dog." And Terenteeva called up to say, "Give me that animal, I have always adored him. He will be my pet, my only pet!" And Boukashov, looking very morose, dropped in one day to make his offer: "I'm a lonely man like you, Father Vikenty, I think your dog will feel more at home with me." But Father Vikenty turned them all down with an enigmatic smile, "Thank you very much, but I've made other arrangements." And his mysterious tone aroused everybody's curiosity, made everyone wonder, while Ivan Ivanovitch drove himself into a state verging on frenzy, trying to figure out what those arrangements were.

Father Vikenty, meanwhile, went quietly about his business, preparing himself for the responsibilities of Lent. Lent to him was always a period of great religious uplift: all his parishioners went to confession and Communion during Lent, and he spent long hours in prayer, begging for enlightenment and meditating over the mysteries of the sacraments. Communion, of course, took place on Saturdays or Sundays during the Divine Liturgy, but most of the confessions took place the night before, after vespers; and as the confessors came to him one by one to kneel in front of a lectern and whisper their sins, he would stand, listen-

ing to them with an inner, spiritual ear, trying to take their sins upon himself and raise his own heart to Heaven. Sometimes toward the end of Lent, especially during Holy Week when the overwhelming number of confessions would exhaust him physically and drain him spiritually, this was hard to achieve. And some confessions — very few in number — came to him almost in the nature of a temptation: Mr. Owtch's confessions for instance, which often sounded like bragging, and those of Ivan Ivanovitch, who seemed to go out of his way to think up the most extraordinary sins; so that at times Father Vikenty couldn't help opening his eyes and exclaiming in a low voice, "Oh, what are you saying, my son? Surely you haven't done that?" And Ivan Ivanovitch would whisper back, "I've thought of it, and thoughts count as much as deeds."

But on this first Saturday evening he came into the church fresh in body and spirit, his prayers and meditations having helped to sweep his mind clean of his own troubles. Before vespers Natasha took him aside and said, "Batiushka, I want to ask a great favor of you. I want you to come to my apartment this evening and hear my confession. I know you will be very tired when you get through here, but after all, I'm getting married tomorrow at three o'clock, and tonight I want this to be more than an ordinary confession. I want to tell you everything that lies on my conscience, to discuss it with you, and only then get an absolution of my sins. So please, please promise you will come." And he promised, and she said she would wait for him and drive him to her place in her car.

After the office of vespers was over, Father Vikenty stationed himself in a corner of the church behind a tall screen, ready to take confessions. He wore his priestly stole over a plain black cassock, and in front of him stood a lectern on which he had placed a cross and an icon of the Saviour. To each confessor in turn he gave his whole attention, then did his best to eradicate from his mind all that he had heard; for some of these confessions were in effect wholehearted outpourings of the soul, a revealing of innermost thoughts and impulses. Yet one of them left so deep an impression on him that for a long time he was unable to forget it.

It was the Princess's confession that had affected him so. She had been among the last to kneel in front of the lectern; and when they had whispered the Lord's Prayer together, and he had interrogated her and had then asked, "Is there anything else you wish to confess?" she said, "Yes, the deadly feeling I bear against my husband. I know Natasha is about to get secretly married. My sister told me — she heard about it from Sandra. But I am pretending to have heard nothing, for my husband is living in constant fear that Natasha might go and do just such a thing. And it's not because of any pity for him that I'm keeping my mouth shut, but because I am afraid of spoiling Natasha's plans. Every day, every hour of the day I'm tempted to tell him about it. I say to myself, 'Perhaps the shock will kill him.' And then I wish he would die, now, this very minute, and relieve us of our misery without my having to help him out of his. And when such thoughts, when this feeling comes over me — for it's more of a feeling than an actual process of thought — I start trembling with horror, and I lock myself up in my room and pray that God may soften my heart. But nothing seems to help. I start asking myself, 'Was it for this that I gave up Joe Donovan? Was it to let my husband hurt my daughter so and break up all our closest ties?' And then again I begin to wish my husband was dead."

Father Vikenty felt the full weight of this confession as though he were making it himself. "You have judged him. And to judge another man is the greatest of sins."

"Yes, I know. I have judged him. Oh Lord, help me, hear my prayers. I want so much to be able to repent and be different, but this feeling keeps coming back to me all the time."

Father Vikenty spoke to her at length, not to chide her and call upon her to repent and strengthen her faith — for he felt that the measure of her faith and repentance was a full one — but to remind her that if anything happened to her husband, it would be Natasha who would never be able to forgive herself and would be hurt far more than she could ever be by the living man. Then he gave her his absolution. But not until he got settled in Natasha's living room and Natasha's hurried and somewhat breathless voice fell upon the silence of the room did the memory of the Princess's confession begin to fade out of his mind.

6

NATASHA and he were seated in two comfortable armchairs, facing one another, an open fireplace between them. Natasha sat with her feet tucked under her, gazing at Punty, who lay fast asleep on the floor near her armchair, while Father Vikenty, still wearing his black cassock but without the priestly stole around his neck, took a few loud sips out of the cup of tea Natasha had brought him. And everything in this room, as he glanced at it over the rim of the teacup — the arrangement of the furniture, and the small objects on the tables, and the pictures on the walls — seemed like an unfinished, adolescent copy of the Princess's drawing room. Yet on one of the tables, right under the picture of the ancestral Tverskoy estate in Russia, was Johnnie's smiling photograph, and Johnnie's pipe, and an opened letter, with an official U.S. Government letterhead, casually dropped beside them. And these objects seemed to foretell the future: a future in which Natasha would live and unfold herself, not in imitation but in self-assertion, in a harmonious blending of the two cultures which lay closely knit within her.

And while Father Vikenty thus peered into the future, feeling both sad and happy — sad because he loved Natasha the way she was, happy because he wanted her to develop and unfold — Natasha remained silent, poking the side of her armchair with the blunt end of a silver paper knife in obvious deliberation as to how to start her confession.

Finally she said, "I will start from the very beginning, Batiushka, from the day you and I met Boukashov. But no, wait, since this is to be a confession, I must in all fairness first tell you how I felt about Johnnie before I met Boukashov. To begin with, I wasn't in love with Johnnie, I have never been really in love with him. But that wasn't what bothered me. I have always contended that

it would be best for me to marry a man I liked, a man I could respect and look up to, rather than one with whom I was wildly infatuated. Infatuation never lasts, and in my case it doesn't seem to change or evolve into anything but an ugly burned stump that could only wreck a marriage. I have seen it happen to others too often to let it happen to me. No, what bothered me about Johnnie — or rather what bothered me about myself — was the fact that I didn't seem to love him enough to marry him. There was so much to overcome, for I did have a feeling, a prejudice, drummed into me since my childhood, against marrying a Jew. Johnnie, of course, had been certain from the very start that I was the only woman for him, that we were predestined for one another, and now I think that perhaps he was right. But then his insistence, the fact that he seemed to take it all almost for granted, used to frighten me. And the more scared I got, the more perverse I became. I began to say to myself, 'I need temptation, I need to be tested, to know whether I could leave another man for Johnnie's sake. And I want to find it out now and not when I'm married and it's too late.' Oh, I know it was stupid of me, wicked, but that was how I felt, or rather, that was how I made myself feel."

And she said, "That day in church when you first mentioned Boukashov's name, I seemed to sense something in the air. Not that I had ever seen him — No, to be quite truthful, I had once seen his picture in the papers and had thought him very handsome. Yes, I had. And it must have been that, and his whole mysterious background, that intrigued me. And when I met him — well you know." She smiled, a crooked, shamefaced little smile. "You will remember, of course, that other time five years ago, when I fell head over heels in love. Good-looking older men, who are both a little bit coarse and a little bit common, seem to be my weakness, don't they? But that's beside the point. Yet, no! It isn't, it's very much to the point — "

She remained silent for a few moments, gazing into herself, then went on: "I behaved outrageously from the very start. You don't have to tell me, I know it. But at least I have always been honest with you, Batiushka. Not that I see any redemption in

that, only a kind of consolation. I did tell you after the christening that I had asked Boukashov to come and see me and intended to arrange for no one else to be there, didn't I? Well, he came. He sat where you are sitting now, drinking a highball. And I sat here, as far away from him as possible, but I know that my eyes were betraying me all the time. And then, suddenly — to say that he began to make love to me would be putting it mildly, it was more a case of attempted rape. And it wasn't my virtue either that saved me but rather a sudden ungovernable anger that this man should think I could be had just for the taking. And when I ordered him to leave, he stood glaring at me, livid, saying, 'What manner of girl are you? I need a woman, and your eyes have promised me everything, and now you refuse me. Are you one of those teasing, amoral products of the bourgeois world, of which I have so often heard tell? No Russian woman would have behaved like this!' And I said, 'How would a Russian woman have behaved?' And he said, 'She would have either given herself completely or not at all.' And I said, 'In that case I am not a Russian woman. Why should I give myself to you? Just because I found you attractive? Why, I hardly know you, and right now I certainly don't know what I want.' And he said, 'You lie! You know very well what you want and you've been begging for it, you have —' And here he said something so coarse and rude I'd rather not repeat it. And I told him to get out, swearing to myself never to see him again."

She sighed. "But early the next morning he was on the phone, humbly begging my forgiveness, and right away I melted and told him to come around at half past twelve. I said we would have a quick drink here, and then go out to lunch. It seemed a safe thing to do. No, that isn't true. It didn't seem safe, I only hoped it would be, and of course it wasn't. I let him kiss me and make love to me, in fact, I must confess it, I let him do everything except one thing. And again it wasn't my virtue that triumphed, but rather his unwillingness to take advantage of me. For now he seemed to be trying to live up to what he thought were the customs of my world, and he kept repeating with a certain pride, as though he were achieving something, 'This is American necking,

eh? Real American necking?' I couldn't help laughing at that. But when he said, very passionately, you know, not at all in fun, 'Oh my little hen, your little rooster wants you so,' something froze in me. I said, 'Enough. Now we must go to lunch.' He looked nonplussed, but he took it well enough. And during lunch he was as sweet as pie until I told him I was going to Terenteeva's party with Johnnie. Instantly he became jealous in that coarse, insane way of his. He forbade me to go with Johnnie, he asked me questions about Johnnie, and I — " She suddenly blushed. "It wasn't very nice, Batiushka. I wasn't loyal. But I told him I would go to the party with Johnnie all the same, and again you know what happened."

She said, "Sometimes I feel terrified by this low, coarse, animal streak in me, for when it awakens I no longer know myself. And that evening at Terenteeva's, even though I was mad at him, I wanted him more than ever. I kept thinking of his hunger for me, of all the ways in which it had expressed itself — not hunger for me perhaps, for just any woman, but somehow that didn't seem to matter any more. And because it didn't seem to matter, I became really scared. I said to myself, You are about to wreck your life, you fool. Yet I couldn't tear myself away from him, although I stopped inviting him up here. Instead we met in restaurants, in bars, or just walked in the streets and in the park. Oh, it's all so strange! For even as my infatuation grew, I became more and more aware of the ambivalence of my feelings for him. There were certain things about him — small things — that were almost repellent to me, yet they excited me at the same time because they were a part of him. And so I tried to fight this lust in me — Lust is an ugly word, but it has to be used here. How else can I describe this feeling that possessed me and which I was trying to fight not on any moral or virtuous grounds but out of sheer animal fear? For a while I even fooled myself into thinking I had succeeded. And then came the night of the Concert-Ball — "

She stared down at her fingernails as though determined that their red polish should draw away the shame which was creeping into her cheeks and burning in her eyes. "Johnnie has told me since that when in my distress — at the Concert-Ball — I in-

stinctively turned to Boukashov and not to him, he almost gave me up. At that moment he felt there was nothing left between us. I have actually no recollection of turning to Boukashov — Oh no, I'm lying again. I knew very well what I was doing, perhaps not quite consciously but I knew it all the same. I was so upset, I needed his physical touch. Yes, and secretly I wanted far more than that. And so he brought me back here and stayed with me half the night." She buried her eyes still deeper into her fingernails. "Batiushka, I don't think I could ever tell you how I felt the next morning; not because of what I had done but because of the way it had been done to me. I guess a woman always knows such things. I knew of course that he was attracted to me, that he was intrigued by me, curious about me, but I also knew that night that he didn't love me. There wasn't a grain of affection, of tenderness, in him, only a wild rage for sexual satisfaction. And because again, somehow, it didn't seem to matter, I felt terrified. I said to myself, If I don't put an end to it right now, this very moment, I'll head for disaster. And I began to conjure up in my mind all those things I just mentioned — all those small things in him that were almost repellent to me. The absurd way in which he curled up his little finger when he held a knife or fork, or when he rolled a bread crumb between his fingers. I said to myself, He probably curls it up when he brushes his teeth. I thought of those appalling pet names and of a dozen other things, but even while they made me cringe, I knew in my heart that I'd rather see nothing but those unattractive mannerisms than never see him at all. And I've never felt so alone as I did that morning, so alone and so afraid of myself."

And now she tore away her eyes from her fingers and looked straight at Father Vikenty. "And then, Batiushka, something so unexpected happened, so ridiculous and pathetic and funny, that even now I have to smile — and I also want to cry — when I think of it. Try to imagine it, Batiushka — the bell ringing, and myself rushing to the door, expecting to see Boukashov, or perhaps a telegram, or a present from him, and finding Kolia Strelkin instead, bowing at me, not to me, like some frightened walrus. He didn't even take off his coat. He marched into the room on flat

feet, sat down in that chair there, and said, 'I have the honor to ask for your hand on my uncle's behalf.' Just like that he said it, as though trying to shoot it off his chest. I could almost hear Boukashov coaching him: 'I have the honor, don't forget to start out with I have the honor, and don't forget to say I'm asking for her hand and not just that I want to marry her, or anything as common as that. This is not some Tovarischtch Milochka for you, but the delicate product of hereditary nobility which is even more refined than the ordinary bourgeoisie.' And so poor Kolia shot it out as best he could, and I knew right away of course that it wasn't love that had prompted Boukashov to ask for my hand in such a strange, unprecedented way, but rather that prudish rigid conscience of his, that — that puritanism, yes a new Soviet form of puritanism, which I think is too ingrained in him to ever disappear no matter how long he lives among us. And there was something Gogolian about the situation, Batiushka: the go-between calling on behalf of the bashful suitor, a go-between, thoroughly ill at ease, who sits perched on the edge of a chair, nervously crumpling the brim of his hat in his hands — Batiushka, I couldn't help it, I just burst out laughing in his face."

Not a dramatic pause but a full glottal stop punctuated her words. Then she said, "Well, that was that. I knew at once it was the end. Kolia flew out of the room as though he had been scalded, and I suppose he never stopped in his headlong flight until he had reached Boukashov and told him the thing which Boukashov would never be able to forgive. I thought I felt nothing but relief, I thought I was glad, yet I sat here in this room all by myself, bawling like a three-year-old, until suddenly I said to myself, Stop it! This is unadulterated hysteria. And I ran into the bathroom and splashed cold water over my face and head, then took a couple of sleeping pills and knocked myself out for the rest of the afternoon."

And now a much longer pause followed. "For three days," she continued at length, "I remained here all alone. I saw no one. I didn't even let Mamma come and see me. And all the time, while I sat here wishing Boukashov would call me up and hoping that he wouldn't, an irresistible longing to see Johnnie kept

creeping up. Somehow I felt that he alone could give me back my stability, my sanity. Of course I was too proud to call him, but Johnnie the ever faithful, Johnnie the clairvoyant, the seer almost — or is it his love that gives him this uncanny insight — ? Well, Johnnie called me, and right away he seemed to have guessed everything, and he was with me here in no time at all, and I was telling him everything — not every detail of course, but the core of the matter, for I felt that the truth must come out before there could be any kind of friendship, any kind of relationship between us. And no one, no one, Batiushka, could have been sweeter and more understanding. During the next two days he hardly left my side, and he took me out in the evenings, and then that morning he called me up about his birthday."

There was a tender smile on her lips now and that misplaced dimple of hers winked once or twice at Father Vikenty. "It was at the Samarkand, Batiushka, when the three of us were dining there, that it suddenly dawned on me how much I really loved him, or perhaps I should say, how much I could get to love him. It was that toast of his that did it. You remember, don't you? When he drank to his own personal hell with gratitude because it had taught him something and because it was coming to an end. There was the whole of Johnnie for you — no reproaches, no complaints, only a strange, wonderful mixture of humility and wisdom."

She pressed the tips of two fingers to the corners of her eyes and stared at them for a moment as though surprised to find them moist. "Let's not go into what happened in the armory, Batiushka. We both know it too well. But I must tell you this: Johnnie brought me home and remained with me that night. It wasn't at all — it wasn't at all — " She almost said "an animal feast," but the words stuck in her mouth. "Oh, who cares what it was not! It's what it was that matters! It was the most soothing, the most comforting night of my life. It was like reaching an anchorage as it were, for I knew that here was a man who needed me, not just for the sake of passion but for himself, for that great integrity that was in him. And in the morning he put his pipe on that table and said, 'This is my home. Wherever you go I will go with

you.' And so tomorrow he and I are going to be married. But don't imagine for an instant that I will let it look like an elopement or anything like that. Oh no! Millicent has lent me a veil, and my bridal gown was delivered here this morning, and next week I'm going to be photographed in it, so that at some future time my children shouldn't think I had been ashamed of marrying their father, or that anyone else had been ashamed of my marrying him."

Here for the first time Father Vikenty interrupted her. "No, no, no! You mustn't say that. You are presupposing that there is something to be ashamed of, and that shows you are still prejudiced. If that's how you feel, better not marry Johnnie."

The blood came creeping slowly into Natasha's cheeks. "Of course, you are right! See, see how unfeeling, how callous I am? Well, then, just to punish myself, I won't have that picture taken. But since we are on the subject of my unfeelingness — No, not my unfeelingness but an opportunism that lies hidden in me, I must tell you one more thing. It is hard, very hard to tell — much harder somehow than all the other things I've confessed here tonight — but since this is a confession, a full confession, I must do it. If he had been a poor man, I wouldn't be marrying him tomorrow. I'm really a mean, spoilt brat, with a secret fear of poverty that must date back to the days of my childhood when we sometimes didn't have enough to eat. And I have a nasty, calculating streak in me. But economy and thrift and foresight and prudence are not a part of my nature. I'm the worst spendthrift on earth, as you well know. That small inheritance from my godfather, Joe Donovan, which I got last year on my twenty-fifth birthday — I'll go through it in no time. There is, of course, this travel agency, for which I work on commission, and of course I could get a steady job — but I hate jobs. The things I really want to do don't bring in money. I want to study painting, I'd like to try my hand at writing, some day I might even get in for politics — I wouldn't put it past me — and all these things will be possible with Johnnie. Yes, he can give them to me, and that's what makes it so — so ugly in a way. But at least I'm not blind, and I'm not hypocritical about it. I have told Johnnie some of this, for I

couldn't start married life on deception and lies. And I am determined not to give a thought to my own wishes and ambitions until I have learned to love Johnnie in the true sense of the word. No, not learned, you cannot learn to love. It will come naturally, I'm sure of that, because of what Johnnie is. And I promise you, Batiushka, on everything that's holy, I will apply my entire being to making a go of this marriage. For the first few years I will think of nothing else. I will put my whole mind, my whole heart into Johnnie, so help me God, and may I not find myself alone, face to face with Boukashov for a long long time to come —"

And that was all. Natasha picked up Punty and carried him into her bedroom. She then brought in a small table and put it in the middle of the room, and Father Vikenty opened the suitcase he had brought with him and placed a cross and an icon of the Saviour on the table. He then took his sacerdotal stole and slipped it over his head, adjusting it so that it should fall in a straight line over his chest down to his knees. And Natasha knelt in front of the makeshift lectern, and Father Vikenty read the prescribed prayers. Then he said, "Do you repent of all the sins you have confessed this evening?" and Natasha whispered, "I do," and bent her head; and he covered her head with the end of his stole and pronounced the Absolution: "May our Lord Jesus Christ, through the grace and bounties of His love toward mankind, forgive thee, my child, all thy transgressions. And I, His unworthy priest, through the power given unto me by Him, do forgive and absolve thee —"

7

THERE WERE many communicants that Sunday, and Natasha and her mother stood among them side by side, waiting for their turn to partake of the Eucharist, while the old Prince from his place at the back of the church followed their every movement. Later, when the Communion was over, Father Vikenty saw mother and daughter cling to one another in a brief embrace before returning to their former places, and a sudden tightening in his throat made him look the other way. Later still he saw Natasha hurrying out of the church without waiting for the final benediction, doubtless fleeing from the insincere kiss — a kiss almost of betrayal — which she would have been obliged to give her father.

It was past one by the time Father Vikenty had taken off his vestments and had left them neatly folded on a side table in the altar, ready to be worn again two hours hence for Natasha's marriage. He went to a corner drugstore, where he ate a cheese sandwich and drank a cup of coffee; then took Dragoon out for a walk. And shortly before three he was back in the altar again, fully robed, peering out through a side door of the iconostasis.

Wistfulness clouded his eyes. This empty church, this silence, was not what he had dreamed of for Natasha's wedding: no large attendance of friends and acquaintances to fill the place with whispers, no flowers to make it look festive (it had been deemed wiser to do without flowers rather than incur the risk of having to answer awkward questions). But a few distant and discreet coughs reminded him that the choir was there in full force, with Madame Pishnik as its pivot by virtue of her somatic if not her vocal predominance. He knew that Ivan Ivanovitch was stationed outside the main entrance to look out for the bride's arrival; and he could

see Miss Katastrofoff standing behind the candle desk instead of Miss Klüpfel.

It was he who had arranged this substitution with a certain amount of qualms, for everyone knew that Miss Katastrofoff was too highly strung to keep to herself such a sensational bit of news as Natasha's secret marriage, while Miss Klüpfel's massive jaw, as much perhaps as her powers of concentration, rendered her impervious to impressions of any kind (the only comment the good lady had been heard to make about the ill-fated Concert-Ball was that it had been unusually well attended and noisy). But Father Vikenty had found it impossible to offend Miss Katastrofoff by leaving her out where the other two members of his Triumvirate were about to function, and so he had taken his precautions: he had told her about the wedding just as he was leaving the church after the Liturgy, thereby giving her only the lunch hour in which to spread the rumor abroad. "Such an emotional creature! Whatever's in her heart is on her tongue, hesitant but unrestrainable. Well, this time she had no chance of spilling it anywhere within reach of the old Prince's ear."

And so, invisible, Father Vikenty watched.

Actually, there were six other people in church, for Johnnie had already arrived and was standing with his brother-in-law to the right of a lectern, placed for the occasion almost in the center of the church, with two gold crowns on it, and two wedding rings, a book of the Gospels, and a cross. Johnnie's face looked tense, his dark eyes seemed unusually pensive and large; and every now and then he glanced over his shoulder to exchange a wistful look with Millicent and smile at her eight-year-old daughter.

To the left of the lectern, on the bride's side of the church, stood Yuri Bourkevitch and Sandra. There was a new look about Sandra, the look of a female ready to move in and take possession. Already she seemed to tower over Yuri, certain of her future ascendancy over him should he become hers for keeps; all set to domineer, not by any outward vulgar act of subjugation but by that mysterious process of connubial mesmerism whereby certain women succeed in reducing a husband to a state of total silence. And this became all the more evident when a few minutes later

Jerry Wilson hurried into the church and began to ask Yuri in an excited whisper about his duties as a crown bearer: for Sandra seemed to hover over every word Yuri said, barely able to restrain herself from silencing him and taking upon herself the role of spokesman. "Oh, my God! This young lady is moving fast in her mama's footsteps!"

But Father Vikenty's melancholy reflections were cut short by the sudden appearance of Ivan Ivanovitch in the main doorway. The little man was waving frantically; and the choir burst into a bridal hymn, and a little boy in a white suit — Millicent's five-year-old son — stepped into the church, carrying a large icon propped against his chest. Ivan Ivanovitch gave him a light shove, for the little boy had stopped dead, frightened no doubt by the vast expanse of empty space which separated him from his final goal — the lectern. Father Vikenty smiled, then strained his eyes to catch a first glimpse of Natasha — the girl he had so longed to see as a bride.

She came in on the arm of her cousin Nikita — the "Carrot" — who was looking very solemn for once. But Father Vikenty hardly noticed him, so shocked was he by her appearance. Everything was there to make her lovely — the bridal veil, the long white train — but her tightly drawn lips seemed bloodless and her strange uptilted eyes were staring into vacancy. It was as if some weird force were driving her unwilling body forward; and she leaned heavily on her cousin's arm.

Anxiety suddenly seized upon Father Vikenty. For just an instant he felt like stopping the marriage, then gave up the idea as an absurdity; after all Natasha knew what she was doing. And with a silent prayer for guidance and help, he opened the big gates of the iconostasis, revealing himself to those in the church in all the splendor of his silver vestments.

He came forward and took the icon from the small bearer's hands and carefully laid it on the lectern; while the little boy, awed by this immense, glistening, bearded apparition of a priest, scurried like a scared rabbit to his mother's side. And Miss Katastrofoff came from behind her desk and gave Natasha and Johnnie two long lighted candles — an ancient custom based on

the words of the Gospel: "He that doeth truth cometh to the light," the candles symbolizing the purity of wedlock and the virtuous life the wedded pair must lead. Sandra, meanwhile, had taken Natasha's bouquet and was holding it. And Miss Katastrof-off gave Sandra a small, plain candle, then crossed to the other side and handed out small candles to Millicent and the children, explaining to "those poor ignorants," as she secretly called them, the proper way to light them: not by striking a match, she whispered, but by passing the flame from one taper to the other.

And all the time Father Vikenty dared not look at Natasha, fearing to see again that sunken face. But when finally he glanced at her, her eyes had just met Johnnie's, and she had just seen Johnnie's lips form a silent word of encouragement and love, and life sprang into her cheeks, and her eyes acquired depth, while the smile that began to play with the corners of her mouth gave her an air of enchantment rather than happiness.

And now Natasha and Johnnie were standing together in front of the lectern, with the four young men lined up behind them in two rows, prepared, when the time came, to hold the crowns over the bridal pair. And Father Vikenty, his anxiety gone, feeling now as though he were giving his own child into the wise and tender care of this young man, began to intone the prayers, pausing every now and then to let the choir sing the responses.

Almost at the very start came the exchange of rings. Father Vikenty took the two rings from the lectern and put one on the bridegroom's finger and the other on the bride's then told Johnnie and Natasha to exchange them three times. And after a number of prayers, interspersed by responses from the choir, he picked up one of the crowns and held it raised in front of the groom, saying, "The servant of God, John, is crowned to the handmaid of God, Natalia: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

It was at this point that Ogden Post, Johnnie's brother-in-law, was supposed to step forward and take the crown from Father Vikenty's hand. But Ogden, not understanding a word of what was being said, and feeling a little annoyed at finding himself in such a predicament, remained motionless. Nikita, who was stand-

ing beside him, tried to explain in a hurried whisper what should be done, but Ogden didn't catch the words and pretended not to hear, a touch of resentment creeping into his embarrassed stare. Father Vikenty beckoned him with a smile, saying in a low voice, "Take it, do not put it on." And Ogden seized the crown and held it over Johnnie's head, his own face grown stolid, as though saying, Since I've got to participate in this odd bit of paganism, I might as well keep my feelings to myself.

Father Vikenty, in the meantime, took the second crown and pronounced the prescribed words over Natasha, then handed the crown to Nikita; and stepping back, he blessed the bridal couple three times, exclaiming in a loud voice, made vibrant by the emotion that was welling up within him, "O Lord our God, with glory and honor I crown them."

And from then on until almost the end of the ceremony the four young men took turns in holding the crowns.

There was much that was symbolic in this service; the crowns represented the honor bestowed upon the wedded pair for a pure life; later Johnnie and Natasha were made to drink wine out of a communal cup in memory of the miracle at the marriage in Cana of Galilee, where water had been turned into wine; and later still Father Vikenty led them three times around the lectern, the circle typifying eternity, the triple circling symbolizing the Trinity.

And after the final benediction he led them up to the big gates of the iconostasis for a short Te Deum. Stationing himself in front of them, with his face to the altar, he began to intone in an ever increasing crescendo the prayer for a long and peaceful life, for health, salvation, and prosperity in all things; "Unto thy servants, John and Natalia, grant, O Lord — "

Natasha crossed herself fervently; and Johnnie looked at her and she looked back at him, swaying a little closer as though to seek protection. And thus they stood, shoulder to shoulder, while Father Vikenty's voice, having reached its apogee, petitioned Heaven on their behalf: "And preserve them for many years." The choir caught up the last words in a loud joyous peal of "Many years, many years, many years — "

And now Madame Pishnik led what must have seemed to John-

nie like an assault. For in accordance with the Russian custom of congratulating newlyweds in church, she advanced on them, followed by Miss Katastrofoff, and Ivan Ivanovitch, and all the members of the choir, all of whom had known Natasha since her childhood. And Madame Pishnik kissed her three times with the utmost effusion, crying out in Russian, "Ach, Natashenka! Och, Natashenka! Our beauty, our charmer! From the very very bottom of my heart I wish you happiness, dear." Then, pushing her purple toque into place with the palm of her hand, she brushed away a tear and turned to Johnnie: "Meester Ston! Like cock you pick pearrrl from manure heap!"

There was an instantaneous reaction among those who stood behind her: Miss Katastrofoff's ejaculation came in very precise English: "How unfortunate can a choice of similes be?" Ivan Ivanovitch emitted an angry growl, while a murmur of protest ran down the entire line of choir singers. But not until each and every one had expressed his good wishes, ranging from fractured to meticulous English, were Natasha and Johnnie allowed to leave the church.

During the next two hours American and Russian customs became strangely intermingled, due of course to Father Vikenty's presence. For Millicent had insisted on giving at least a semblance of a reception, with a wedding cake and champagne, and it was to the Ogden Post apartment on Park Avenue that Nikita, Sandra, Yuri, and Jerry Wilson went from the church, taking Father Vikenty with them.

A servant led them through Millicent's big modern living room into the dining room, where the table was set for eleven, with the wedding cake in the center. Natasha and Johnnie sat down side by side, and Millicent turned to Father Vikenty, "Where would you like to sit, Father?"

"Millicent dear, today I am Natasha's father, spiritual and cor-po-real." Unexpected English words had a way of coming to him, seemingly out of nowhere, and as always on such occasions, he now opened his eyes a little wider, surprised at himself. Then he went on: "And Sandra here, she represent Mother. So she and I will seet next to bridegroom. And you and your husband repre-

sent Johnnie's parents, so you seet next to bride. And everybody else, including children — What your names?" he suddenly asked.

The two children stared back at him, understanding little of his broken English yet thoroughly impressed by his appearance and his deep voice. And Millicent said, "They were named after us — Millicent and Ogden — but we call them Miggie and Og."

"Meegie and Og? Very nice — " The names seemed hardly like names to him, but politely he added, "Very good children all the same. Very. And so everybody else seet where they want. Good?"

Amused by this sudden display of authority, everyone settled down in accordance with his wishes. And when the servants had poured out the champagne, a few toasts were drunk.

Millicent said, "I'm not much of a speechmaker, I just want to tell you how happy I am, Natasha darling, to be the first to welcome you into our family. You are my sister now and I am proud of it, yet nothing could seem more natural to me — I have always thought of you as one of us. And I'm sure my parents will feel the same way, for we've often spoken of you. So here's to my brother and sister, Johnnie and Natasha, and may they be very happy for many years to come."

And Ogden said, "It is indeed both a privilege and a pleasure, Natasha, to welcome you into our family. And perhaps I should be making a long and impressive speech, since I am here not only representing myself but also Mr. Stone, as Father — as Father — "

"Father Vikenty," Johnnie prompted him.

"Yes, of course. Thank you. As Father Vakenshy so rightly pointed out a moment ago. But you must excuse me. Somehow I feel that a long speech would be out of place. This is such a small, such an intimate gathering that I will limit myself to a few words." The memory of the Russian wedding ceremony and all that had followed was still too fresh in his mind, and the "quaintness" of it all (that was how he had expressed it to Millicent on their way home from church) must have rankled a little in his New England conscience, still strong in him in spite of the many years he had spent in New York. He hemmed and hawed over it for a second, then said: "Today we saw an unusual marriage ceremony — un-

usual of course to us simple Americans. But let us not forget that religious freedom is a basic principle of our American way of life, and it's a fine principle — to witness Natasha! For Natasha is one of us, very much one of us. She was born in New York City and graduated from Miss Pollard's in Connecticut and from Mansfield. She plays tennis like a champion and can outswim any man. And if I were ever led blindfolded into some distant, alien land and heard Natasha speak, why I'd exclaim, "There's an American girl, give her to me!' But it's my brother-in-law, Johnnie, who is giving her to us today."

And Jerry Wilson said, "Shucks! What else is there to say? Sure she's one of us, that goes without saying. Just listen to her talk, watch her dance, look at her clothes — The first time I met Natasha was two years ago in Paris. 'Gee,' I cried, 'an American girl! What's your name?' And she said, 'Natasha Tverskoy,' and I fainted." He paused for an instant to let the laughter die down. "But what's in a name, I ask you? We've got the Pulaski Skyway, haven't we? So now we've got this Natasha Tverskoy Stone. It's all in the picture, with TV and taxes and a slap-happy budget, with a drum of intolerance and a barrel of fun, and the sky for a limit and a conscience to drag. But always — ah yes, always — a grain of common sense at the bottom of it all to sober us up now and then. Now doesn't that fit Natasha to a tee, Father Vashenky? Bet your life it does! So here's to Natasha and that lucky man of hers. Oh boy, Johnnie, I'll say you're lucky!"

Father Vikenty wasn't sure he liked having a Tverskoy compared to the Pulaski Skyway; but there was something else besides that that had really jarred on him in these speeches, and although he hadn't drunk a drop, a kind of drunken indignation rose up within him — what sort of a leveling was this? And his great rumble of a voice suddenly filled the room: "No, no, no! Natasha not like you, and you not like Natasha! Of course she not completely different, she not giraffe or hippopotam but you not Tverskoy and Nashchokin. No! Fach is each, and all together — to build good worrrld!"

He saw the grin of amusement on Nikita's freckled face; he saw Yuri gazing at him in surprise through his horn-rimmed glasses,

and Sandra hiding behind her acquiescent smile like a geisha in a tea house; he saw little Og puffing with laughter, and Miggie staring at him out of a pair of solemn eyes; and he broke into one of those soft silent laughs of his, his whole body shaking with mirth at his own outburst of indignation. And the others laughed with him, and Father Vikenty cried: "Now we have old Russian custom: everybody feeling sad and bitter because bride and groom no keess. So we all shout *'Gorko'* — it means bitter in Russian — until he keess her, straight into lips of course." He shouted *"Gorko! Gorko!"* making signs to everyone to shout with him, while Johnnie kissed Natasha. He repeated this three times, and everyone except Ogden joined in. Father Vikenty went over and nudged him: *"Gorko,* Ogden, *gorko"*; and Ogden began to shout *"Gorko, gorko,"* with a strained look in his face. Miggie, her eyes bigger than ever, leaned forward in her chair, exclaiming, "Oh, Daddy, you look like a fish out of water!" And Ogden's last cry of *"Gorko"* broke in two, ending up in a kind of explosion; but his face, though red, seemed youthful and innocent now with the merry marks of laughter upon it.

And presently Ogden started a phonograph, and a servant rolled back the big rug in the living room, and Johnnie waltzed with Natasha. Then Ogden, and Nikita, and Jerry, and Yuri, and even little Og, took turns dancing with her; and then everybody danced, while Father Vikenty sat back in an armchair, exclaiming: "Nice good American pleasures!"

Later they all returned to the dining room for the cutting of the wedding cake. And later still Natasha drew Father Vikenty aside, laying her hands on his shoulders and looking up earnestly into his eyes. "Batiushka, I've got one more favor to ask of you."

But she didn't have to tell him — he knew. "Yes, Natasha dear. When I leave here I'll go straight to your parents, and I will tell them."

Tears stood in her eyes. "Darling Batiushka — ! Johnnie and I will be at the hotel, where Johnnie has taken a suite — Oh, Batiushka, if you could only make my father see — "

She left her sentence unfinished, looking sharply away. Johnnie came up and slipped his arm round her shoulders, and Father

Vikenty said, "She now yours, Johnnie. You take good care of her." Their eyes met, and Father Vikenty's smile spread rapidly through his beard. "No, I said nothing — I know you vill. And now, another good Russian custom, from father to son — a hug and three keesses!" And he embraced Johnnie and kissed him three times on the cheeks.

Natasha went to Millicent's room to change her clothes. When she returned, wearing a hat and a fur coat, she gave her bridal bouquet to Sandra. "No use throwing it, it's yours," she laughed.

Johnnie and she were showered with rice on their way to the elevator; and Father Vikenty, in a sudden overflow of affection, dropped a pinch of rice down Johnnie's collar.

It was to a big empty and disrupted living room that Father Vikenty returned with Millicent and Ogden. The others seemed to have disappeared, and he stayed on for a few minutes, then took his leave.

On his way out, as he passed by an open door, he caught sight of Sandra and Yuri, sitting in the library, and he heard Sandra say, "Yes, just imagine! Almost to the very last minute she was with that impossible Boukashov! You know how much I love Natasha, but it's a source of constant amazement to me how unpredictable and even shameless she can be at times."

And Yuri said, his voice moved, his eyes mooning, "But you are so different, Sandra, so deep and dependable — "

And Father Vikenty said, "Wham!"

8

IT WAS well after six by the time Father Vikenty turned the corner of East Eighty-second Street and approached the apartment house in which the Tverskoys lived. By now, he thought, they will have finished their tea and will perhaps be having a drink; at least the Prince would. Of course, the old Countess — Aunt Dasha — might be with them, or Aunt Ella. He made a wry face. But his hopes of finding the Tverskoys alone that afternoon were running high. In church that morning the Princess had whispered, "Come and see us, Batiushka, when it's all over;" and doubtless she would have arranged to be alone with her husband when the news of Natasha's marriage was broken to him.

His suppositions proved to be correct. The door was opened by an elderly woman, a Lithuanian D.P. who worked for the Tverskoys and who took his hat and coat; and Suleiman-the-Magnificent-Schnitzel, his little whip of a tail straight in the air, barked himself hoarse, the way dachshunds will, to swagger and draw attention to themselves rather than to frighten away an intruder. But the Tverskoys were alone in their living room, the Prince seated on a sofa, with a glass of whiskey on a small table in front of him; the Princess in her favorite armchair, knitting.

Her smile of welcome was a bit tense, but otherwise she in no way betrayed her emotions, while the Prince rose to greet Father Vikenty. "Ah — what a pleasant surprise! What kindly fate has brought you to us? And just in time to join me in a drink, too. What will it be, Batiushka — whiskey?" Father Vikenty refused. On that terrible morning after his night's debauchery he had secretly sworn off drinking for life, but to declare it seemed almost like bragging, and he therefore gave Lent as an excuse. "Tea then?"

Again Father Vikenty refused, and, embarrassed, sank into an

armchair opposite his host. Now that the moment had come, words failed him. He glanced at the Princess, hoping to get some help from her, but she had buried her eyes in her knitting; and her long white fingers moved swiftly, working the needles and occasionally tossing the thread of yarn out of the way. Yet he knew that she was listening; listening with her whole being, intently, breathlessly, for the words which refused to come.

Never had he felt so uncomfortable, so cruel, so much like a member of a conspiracy. It was as though he had stolen into a stranger's home, into a room he had never seen before, and sat facing the innocent dupe, the victim, with the eyes of the conspirators upon him; he — the priest, the shepherd, the consoler — ready to hurt and torment, to tear open a wound which might never heal. Was it this half-dismantled living room that had affected him so? For most of the Tverskoy's furniture and belongings had already been moved to the country. Everything looked so strange; even the sapphire ring on the Princess's third finger — that little round dark cabochon which was so much a part of her — seemed unfamliiar somehow. His eyes traveled around, searching for an answer; yet deep inside of himself he knew that it was the expression on the Prince's face that held him tongue-tied — that look of confidence and trust, of total unsuspicion. Life, when it intends to give a man a jolt, has a way at times of draining his mind of all misgivings. And so it was with the Prince that afternoon. He looked almost at peace with himself for once, and his smile was debonair as he said, "Well, Batiushka, what's new?"

And then it came out, just like that, bluntly: "Natasha got married today."

At first the Prince didn't seem to understand. "Married — ?"

But Father Vikenty drove it in, mercilessly, "Yes. She and Johnnie were married at three o'clock this afternoon."

The Prince had raised his glass to his lips, now he brought it down with the full force of his arm; and the glass broke, spilling the ice and whiskey all over the table. The Princess jumped to her feet and ran out into the kitchen to get a cloth, and the Lithuanian woman came running back with her to wipe the table and carry away the pieces of broken glass.

All of this created a diversion. It helped Father Vikenty to find

his inner stability; but it also gave the Prince time to organize his thinking. Like a spear he thrust his outrage at Father Vikenty, glaring at him with the air of an inquisitor.

"Who married them?"

"I did."

"You? Then you are nothing but a traitor."

"Andrey, Andrey, what are you saying?" cried the Princess. "Would you have preferred her to be married by a stranger, or in some Protestant church, or perhaps not in a church at all?"

But her husband silenced her with a wave of his hand. "You committed an unlawful act, Father Vikenty. Marriages are forbidden during Lent."

It must have been Lent that had given him that sense of security, it must have been Lent that had lulled his suspicions and strengthened his hopes. And Father Vikenty, his pity for the man rising, said, "My lord Sofrony gave Natasha a special dispensation."

"And who got her that dispensation?"

"I took her to the monastery." If only he could divert the whole fury of the storm upon himself, help it to blow itself away and bring relief to those around him . . .

The Prince continued his questioning, his voice cold and sharp: "You didn't inform my lord Sofrony that I would never give my consent to this marriage?"

"No."

"And you have the effrontery, the gall to come here and tell me this?"

"Oh, my dear Prince, there is no effrontery, no gall in me at this moment, I assure you. I thought it would be kinder if I came and told you myself. Would you really rather have been told by a total stranger, perhaps read about it in a newspaper?"

"I would rather be dead, that's what I would rather be! But that is beside the point. What I want to know is who was present at this marriage? I'm only interested in our relatives of course."

"Nikita and Sandra."

"Hah! Her family, not mine, thank God!" The Prince's short laugh was accompanied by a jerk of the head in his wife's direc-

tion. It seemed incredible that at a moment such as this he could find consolation in anything so trivial and meaningless. But there it was — "Hah! Her family, not mine!"

And once again the Princess put in her word: "Andrey, be honest with yourself. How would you have liked it if she had been surrounded by no one but strangers?"

The Prince gave her a cold fishy stare. "Why not? She is a stranger!" Then, in a voice that came close to breaking, "How could she have done this to me?"

And now words, vicious, cruel, came pouring forth. Yet with every sentence spluttered out by the Prince Father Vikenty's pity for him grew and expanded; for every word in every sentence was a stab, a wound, a gash, inflicted in a blind hatred not of Natasha but of himself, of his own relentlessness, his unforgivingness. "She did it on purpose, to hurt me! Didn't she say the other day, 'I've a good mind to marry a Jew, just to see how you will take it'? Well, she has done it . . . Deliberately she has done it, to kill me, to destroy me. That child hates me, has always hated me. It's as if she knew she should have been Joe Donovan's child, not mine. But I'm not so easily killed, and I refuse to be destroyed. And I tell you here and now, never again shall Natasha's foot step across my threshold. D'you hear me, Ducky?"

He turned to where his wife had stood, but she was no longer there, and the click of a closing door — the door of her bedroom — sounded through the room. Schnitzel scratched at the door, and Father Vikenty opened it just wide enough to let the little dog squeeze through.

When Father Vikenty returned to his seat, the Prince's lips had begun to tremble. "She, too — " he muttered, "she, too, has left me."

Father Vikenty's low voice gave an immediate response: "Try to pray, my son. God is merciful."

"Oh, no! God isn't merciful. God is terrible! Would He have done this to me had He been merciful? No! He is terrible, I tell you, and that is why men go on worshiping Him. Who would care about the feelings of a merciful god, except to say, 'Oh, He'll forgive me in the end'? Fear alone keeps men lined up in obedience,

and God doesn't forget and forgive. Nothing in Christ's teachings has ever impressed me more than the words, 'Lead us not into temptation.' I feel awed every time I repeat them, for there is no end to temptation, no end for the poor wretch who gets marked down on God's black list."

"There is no such thing," Father Vikenty wanted to exclaim. "It's we who mark ourselves down on our own black lists. And there is no forgiveness without forgiving — the two hang together." But his words were held back by that old feeling, that defeating modesty of his, that humility: The Prince must know it better than he did; such ravings could only be the outcome of his dispair, and this was no time to sit back and preach. So Father Vikenty held his peace.

The Princess came in and stood between them. She was dressed to go out, in her hat and coat. Her back was turned on him, and Father Vikenty couldn't see her face, but he saw a look of panic flash through the Prince's eyes. For a moment she stood there, as though measuring the man she had been married to all these years. Then into the pause she flung her grief, not in agony, nor even in pain and distress, but in a kind of cold, deliberate kill: "I have known all along that Natasha was getting married today, and I did not tell you. And now I am going to her, to give her my blessing and acknowledge her husband as my son."

She didn't ask for Natasha's address, she must have known it — those secret Sandra-Aunt Ella reports must have come in on time. Father Vikenty dared not look at her or at the Prince. He heard her cross the room and he heard the front door close behind her.

It was a rattle deep down in the Prince's throat that brought him to his feet. The Prince's face had turned almost black, and he was clawing frantically at his collar, tearing it open. The memory of the Princess's confession went reeling through Father Vikenty's brain, with only one thought milling around in it: If this man dies now, how could she ever face life? And he closed his eyes, repeating the same words over and over again, "Oh God, don't let him die, don't let him die. Oh God, oh God, don't let him die — "

A sigh as of infinite relief seemed to fill the silence around him.

He opened his eyes. He saw the blood streaming from the Prince's nose, and instantly he knew that the danger had passed. He remembered how his mother used to put a cold key at the back of his neck to stop a nosebleed. And it was with a feeling of happiness, almost of joy, that he made the Prince recline on the sofa, propping a few pillows behind him and shouting to the Lithuanian woman to bring a bag of ice and some Kleenex, then ran to the telephone and called a doctor.

9

WITH THE PASSING of this first Sunday in Lent, one of the three weeks of grace granted by the Archbishop to Father Vikenty came to a close. Now another week slipped by, and a second Sunday came and went, and still Father Vikenty had done nothing to solve the problem of Dragoon's fate. To an outsider this blindness, this inertia might have appeared as a sign of insensitivity and indifference; Ivan Ivanovitch saw in it a symptom of insanity — for what other explanation could he have given for such insubordination on the part of one who, everyone knew, stood in awe of the prelate? To Father Vikenty, of course, it was a test of his endurance, a test of his faith; and he had sustained himself during those two weeks with an occasional flip of the mind: In God's hands I have placed the matter, and in God's hands it rests.

But with the dawning of the third and final week, as he got out of bed on Monday morning and saw Dragoon greeting him with a shake of the head and a joyous wiggle of his behind, doubts suddenly assailed him. There had been no sign; no, not even a semblance of a sign. Was it God's will, then, to leave the matter in his hands? That seemed impossible, too much like passing the buck; and quickly he laid the blame on his own unbelief: "Oh, I'm a man of little faith, so help me God!" But no reinforcement of faith came to his aid, while doubts continued to flourish. He tried to scold himself, but fear lurked behind his chiding, and for the first time he took refuge in the Princess's offer: If nothing happens between now and Sunday, I can always take Dragoon to that farmer —

And yet it was inconceivable, somehow, that God should wish to inflict this loneliness, this suffering on Dragoon, when a swift painless death seemed so much kinder; a painless death, moreover, which would serve as his — Father Vikenty's — purification in

preparedness for a higher, a more spiritual existence which, he felt sure, he would be called upon to lead after the miracle of reconciliation had taken place. "A sign, I beg for a sign, any sign, no matter how small, how unimportant," he kept pleading. For in his obsession, born of duress, he was doing precisely what the Archbishop had warned him against when he had said, "You speak of God as if you were speaking of me, or of yourself, or of some other man." And as though to keep himself from going adrift, he reminded himself constantly throughout that week of the farmer in Connecticut.

It was Ivan Ivanovitch who did it with his persistent ridiculous offers. Every day the little man appeared with a new one: on Monday it was a decrepit old woman in Passaic, on Tuesday a dissolute man on Long Island, on Wednesday a friend of his, a butcher (Father Vikenty almost slapped his face for that one); and on Thursday it was Mr. Owtch again who was to become Dragoon's custodian. Father Vikenty turned them all down, still clinging to that enigmatic smile of his, worn a little thin by now: "Thank you very much, but I've made other arrangements." And with every refusal Ivan Ivanovitch grew more and more frantic, so that by the end of the week he could neither think nor talk of anything else. He stopped reading the papers, stopped listening to the news, or even to gossip; and he ran around in circles, exclaiming, "Something must be done to save this obstinate priest from his own iniquity and folly." Father Vikenty, although he did not fully admit it to himself, got out of it all a certain perverse pleasure; it seemed like a weird game, or a contest, not between God and the Devil but between his forbearance and Ivan Ivanovitch's importunities.

And then on Friday morning the telephone rang on Father Vikenty's desk. He picked up the receiver, and there was Natasha, just as though she were in the room with him, her eyes questioning him, a puzzled smile on her lips: "Batiushka, Mamma wants to know what you have decided about Dragoon. The day after tomorrow is Sunday, you know — your deadline. Mamma has made all the necessary arrangements. Everything is set, and I assure you this farmer and his wife will take very good care of Dragoon. And after all, Batiushka, it's only for two months — "

Father Vikenty felt a strange stillness in his heart. Was this perhaps the sign he had been waiting for? "Oh, Natasha, I know, I know, and I believe you, and I'm very grateful. But I do want to keep him to the very last minute."

"Why of course, naturally! How about Sunday after church? I'll drive you out."

There was a finality about the way she said it, and it frightened him. That spiritual recklessness came upon him again. If he consented now, wouldn't he be predetermining things? "No, Natasha, no, don't make it so definite. Who can tell — ? If you don't mind, I'd rather call you Sunday morning. And if I don't, well — well you'll know I've made other arrangements — "

"Very well, Batiushka, have it your way." She laughed, humoring him, certain that no other arrangements could be made at the last minute. And then, plunging into her own affairs, she told him that Johnnie had left the day before, that she missed him more than she could tell. "And yesterday afternoon I had a surprise, Batiushka — my father came to see me. He was so subdued, so kind in a strange way. Something has happened to him. And although he didn't mention Johnnie by name, no not once, not even indirectly, I have a feeling that in time — Oh, Batiushka darling, say a prayer for us, that everything should come out right."

A click of the receiver, and she was gone.

Had Father Vikenty been able to relinquish then and there all his worries and fears and doubts in a wholehearted prayer for Natasha's peace and happiness, he might have unburdened himself, and a clarity of vision might have come to him; he might even have called her back and said, "Let us take Dragoon out there today, Natasha. Let us not put off what has to be done." But instead, he glanced down at Dragoon, and Dragoon looked so pitiful. With a dog's instinct for the inevitable, for departures and death, he seemed crushed by grief, as though he had understood every word that had been said; he shivered a little, his head bent, his shoulder pressed against his master's knee. And again something locked inside Father Vikenty. Whatever it was to be — departure or death — he would keep Dragoon to the very last, and

every moment of these last two days would be dedicated to Dragoon.

But first something had to be done about Ivan Ivanovitch. Yes, something had to be done right away; the thought of spending those two days under the constant threat of a visitation — the little man had a way of popping up where he was least wanted — was intolerable. And with his mind suddenly made up, Father Vikenty dressed in a hurry and went to the Club, taking Dragoon with him.

He found Ivan Ivanovitch in the back office, making out a new list of impossible custodians for Dragoon. The little man didn't hear him come in, and Father Vikenty took him by surprise: "Give me the key to my apartment."

He said it so abruptly, in a tone of such command that Ivan Ivanovitch handed him the key before he had quite realized what he was doing, then tried to snatch it back. But Father Vikenty held it in his closed fist. "Your services as my conscience will no longer be needed."

"That is not for you, that's for my lord Sofrony to decide."

But Father Vikenty grandly waved aside this bit of impertinence. "Unless some emergency arises — some illness or death, I mean — I do not wish to be disturbed, do you understand? I do not wish to see anybody, no not a soul, until tomorrow evening at vespers. I'm making arrangements for Dragoon's departure, and I want to be alone."

Later that day, and throughout the whole of Saturday, people saw the big priest in his huge black hat wandering through the streets with his dog, or playing with him in the park, or going into a store to buy dog candy. And around noon on Saturday he was seen entering a restaurant, where he ordered two Wiener Schnitzels with carrots and string beans, and gave them to Dragoon, explaining to the astounded waiter, "No, no, I no eat meat. Now it is Lent and I fast."

He must have spent his last dollar on Dragoon that day; and he felt happy, living every minute of the hour: just he and Dragoon, and no one else in the world. But had he glanced over his shoulder, he would have recognized in the distance that cauli-

flower ear sticking above the upturned collar of an overcoat, for Ivan Ivanovitch had been stalking him for two days, his eyes growing wild with incredulity and a kind of mad concern.

And in church that evening before vespers Ivan Ivanovitch rushed up to Madame Pishnik and Miss Katastrofoff: "I tell you, Father Vikenty is going mad! He has done nothing about his dog, he takes him to restaurants instead. If something isn't done to save that obstinate priest from himself, God alone knows what will happen. You know how furious my Lord Sofrony will be!"

Madame Pishnik was in no mood to listen to Ivan Ivanovitch. "Take advantage of Lent and save yourself," she snapped.

But Miss Katastrofoff said, "As usual, the church warden is far too impetuous — But if our dear Batiushka has done nothing — Oh, of course he isn't mad, but he may be overwrought — " She turned to Madame Pishnik, her eyes more bulbous than ever with the intensity of her emotions. "Tell — Do tell — Please tell the church warden — I mean if he can save Father Vikenty from the Archbishop's wrath — No, that's not it — If he *thinks* he can save him, he should do it — "

Ivan Ivanovitch bowed stiffly, from the waist, not to her — for there was no direct intercourse between them — but to her shadow which lay, faint and meager, somewhere between herself and Madame Pishnik.

Father Vikenty, in the meantime, had come into the church. He stopped to look at them, doubtless guessing what they were talking about; and the moment they saw him, they dispersed.

There were comparatively few confessions after the service that evening, and Father Vikenty got home around nine o'clock. During vespers he had prayed long and fervently, and now that strange stillness filled his heart once more. Everything was settled, everything was in accordance with God's will. This was his last evening on earth with Dragoon. The dog's departure would have the finality of death for both of them: he would never torture Dragoon by paying him short visits and then leaving him to new miseries; and Dragoon — Well, how could one explain to a dog that his master was still alive when not so much as a smell, no not even a whiff, could be traced in the air to tell of his existence? Yet

Father Vikenty, although he had reasoned it out in this way, was not complaining. He felt reconciled. He was looking at Dragoon now, lovingly, without a thought to the future, in complete enjoyment of the present moment.

They were in the kitchen together. Father Vikenty was eating crackers and cheese and drinking a glass of tea, while Dragoon frisked around him, begging for some choice morsel. Finally, and entirely out of turn, he performed his one parlor trick: he pawed Father Vikenty three times and emitted three short barks, one for each syllable of "*Spa-si-bo*". And as always on such occasions, he puckered his mouth into a little *o*, and it gave him a prissy look.

Father Vikenty burst out laughing. "Ech, Dragoonushka, Dragoon, such a comedian! You'll be the death of me yet. Haven't you had enough to eat today? Like a pig you've been stuffing yourself, my dear. Such a glutton! But all right, all right — Everything is permissible tonight, everything but my bed. No, Dragoon, no, not the bed. That — that is out of the question." Dragoon, however, was only interested in food; and Father Vikenty, still laughing, stood up. "Well, perhaps a miracle has happened and we will find something with which to satisfy a greedy dog. A big bone would be nice, wouldn't it?"

Like some modern version of Mother Hubbard Father Vikenty went to the refrigerator; but just as he was about to open it, a loud knock on the front door sounded through the flat. Dragoon pricked up his ears. He barked once — only once — then ran into the next room and sniffed at the door. This in itself was strange, but if ever a mind had been drained of all suspicion, Father Vikenty's was that evening. He went to the door and threw it open.

Ivan Ivanovitch stepped in, bowing almost obsequiously. In both hands he held a small box wrapped in brown paper. Dragoon stretched out his neck and sniffed at it.

"Yes, smell it, smell it, and good health to you," said Ivan Ivanovitch, trying to sound gentle but achieving only a sugary purr, which ill suited his countenance, particularly those eyes of his, at once timid and malevolent. He grinned at Father Vikenty. "I've brought Dragoonushka a farewell gift." Father Vikenty had never

heard him call the dog Dragoonushka, and he felt touched. Even this cantankerous little man could have a heart at times. "If you can entertain Dragoon in a restaurant," Ivan Ivanovitch continued, "why shouldn't I bring him a bon-bon of sorts?"

It was a bad slip on the part of Ivan Ivanovitch to have mentioned the restaurant; it should have put Father Vikenty on his guard, but the priest's mind remained as innocent as a child's. "Oh, how fast rumors travel," he laughed. "Already you have heard of our little outing, eh? Well, I must say I hesitated in front of that restaurant before going in, seeing that it's Lent and all that. But then I said to myself, 'Why not? Dragoonushka doesn't have to fast!' — But do come in, Ivan Ivanovitch. For once you are visiting Dragoon in friendship not in hate, and you are welcome. Let me help you off with your coat."

But Ivan Ivanovitch, with that peculiar brand of Russian modesty which forbids a man to let his friend help him with his coat, wouldn't hear of it. He danced about, always facing Father Vikenty, and performed a series of contortions, trying to get out of his coat without letting go of the box. And his oversized coat billowed and waved and undulated around him as though shaken by a gale, while Dragoon kept sniffing the box.

But at long last Ivan Ivanovitch succeeded in extricating himself. He hung the coat on a peg and followed Father Vikenty into the kitchen. There he drew up a chair to the table and sat down opposite his host, holding the box on his knees.

Again Dragoon stretched out his neck and sniffed.

"You see, Dragoonushka," Father Vikenty cried, "we didn't have to plunder our refrigerator after all!" (The refrigerator was empty.) "Ivan Ivanovitch has brought you a little fairing."

"Yes," said Ivan Ivanovitch, unwrapping the box, and throwing the string and paper into a corner of the room. "A little fairing for a big dog who is about to go on a long journey."

"Oh, not so long," said Father Vikenty.

Ivan Ivanovitch had opened the box, still holding it under the table, and Dragoon had bounced towards it. But the little man, suddenly hesitant, closed the box right in front of Dragoon's nose.

Surprised, Dragoon stood back, a long string of saliva descending from the corner of his mouth to the floor.

"Dragoonushka! Such abominable manners!" Father Vikenty chuckled. "One might think I was in the habit of starving you. Is this all I get for taking you to a nice restaurant?"

"And may I ask," Ivan Ivanovitch enquired, his eyes directed straight at Father Vikenty. "What arrangements have you made for the disposal of Dragoon?"

Something stirred in Father Vikenty, not in enmity but in irritation. It was the word "disposal" that had done it. Had Ivan Ivanovitch expressed himself in some other way, Father Vikenty would probably have told him about the farmer in Connecticut; but the whole of Ivan Ivanovitch's unlovely nature seemed to be reflected in that word. Who did he think Dragoon was to be disposed of like some stick of furniture, or some piece of garbage? Just for that he wouldn't tell him a thing. No, not a word! And why was this man snooping around here anyway, when he had expressly told him not to come? Father Vikenty puffed out his lips and drummed his fingers on the edge of the table.

Finally he said, "There will be no disposal."

"None?"

"None!"

The same mad concern appeared in Ivan Ivanovitch's eyes; and it seemed to mingle with sudden relief in the long breath which he now drew. He opened the box and gave Dragoon a lump of meat, then shook his head dolefully at his host. "I'm sorry for you, Father Vikenty."

Dragoon had swallowed the meat at a gulp and was waiting for more. But once again Ivan Ivanovitch hesitated. "Have you thought of the consequences, Father Vikenty? Have you thought of what my lord Sofrony will say and do? Already he thinks you've gone off your head. He said you baptized a dog the other day."

"Who? Me? What are you talking about?"

Ivan Ivanovitch looked down at the box, picking out another choice lump of meat. "That's what he told his attendant, and his attendant told Meester Owtch, and Meester Owtch told me this evening in church. Meester Owtch, as you know, has been freshening up some of the walls in the monastery in readiness for Easter."

A sharp denial had risen to Father Vikenty's tongue, but now

every detail of the episode in the monastery between Natasha and the Archbishop and Punty returned to his mind, and he shut his mouth.

"It's none of your business," he said at length.

Ivan Ivanovitch changed his mind. Instead of giving Dragoon the lump of meat, he put it back in the box and placed the open box on the floor so that Dragoon could gobble up all its contents. Then again he shook his head at Father Vikenty. "I'm sorry for you — oh, so sorry —"

Father Vikenty said nothing. He was fighting an inner battle. This evening of all evenings, when the Angel of the Lord might be gliding in and out of the room, perhaps even hovering over him this very minute, he should be serene, at peace with himself and with the world; yet everything the little man said and did irritated him. And so he sat there trying to conquer his irritation, still drumming his fingers on the table and puffing out his lips.

He didn't even look to see whether Dragoon was enjoying the meat. He didn't know that Dragoon, having left an uneaten lump in the box, was looking up at Ivan Ivanovitch with puzzled eyes, as though asking, Why are you doing this? It isn't natural! And he backed a little, an almost human stare in his eyes — the betrayed confronting the betrayer. But things seemed to slip past Father Vikenty, and he never became fully aware of Ivan Ivanovitch's sudden lunge, as the latter seized Dragoon around the shoulders and shoved the last piece of meat down his throat, muttering, "You don't look a gift horse in the mouth, you son of a bitch!"

Offended, Dragoon trotted into the next room and lay down on his mattress, while Ivan Ivanovitch sprang to his feet. "I must go, I really must go," he said.

Father Vikenty protested. "No. You will stay. You have been kind, you brought Dragoon a present, you fed him, and I've been very disagreeable about it all. Now you must give me a chance to atone. Of course you do have a nasty habit of sticking your nose into other people's business, but I suppose you can't help that — it's part of your nature — So please stay and have a glass of tea."

Ivan Ivanovitch's frenzied eyes were all over the place, as he thought up one excuse after another to slip away; but Father Vikenty would have none of it. And in a kind of desperation the little man closed the door which led into the other room.

Well, if he wants the door closed, let him have it closed, thought Father Vikenty. Perhaps he was sitting in a draft and didn't like it. I don't care, so long as I have time to find myself. For his apology had not been a sincere one, it hadn't come from his heart: he had spoiled it by making that reference to the little man's nosiness, and as a result his irritation had turned against himself. But given a little more time, he thought, he would bring himself to do the right thing — confess to Ivan Ivanovitch that he had been fooling him all along.

And now his big voice filled the kitchen, talking at random of this and that — the mortgage on the church, the supply of sacerdotal wine, Miss Klüpfel, candles, Miss Katastrofoff, Madame Pishnik — while Ivan Ivanovitch drank two glasses of tea, growing more and more restless, his eyes shifting, darting here and there.

Over half an hour went by; and Father Vikenty, who until then had avoided looking too closely at Ivan Ivanovitch, suddenly became aware of the man's uneasiness. "What is the matter with you? You seem to be on pins and needles."

And Ivan Ivanovitch cried, "For heaven's sake, why are you keeping me here? Why are you talking so much? Can't you see I'm tired? I've been working hard all day, I'm tired!"

Father Vikenty shook his head in contrition. His heart was full of pity now for this little man who had tried so hard to be good and kind. "How thoughtless of me! Of course, you must be exhausted. But before you go I must tell you something that will help you get a good night's sleep. You see, I've been deceiving you. I don't know why, but I have. I had no intention of disobeying my lord Sofrony. Tomorrow afternoon Natasha and I are taking Dragoon to Connecticut — "

He never finished his sentence. With a cry, that was yet but a groan of pain and dismay, Ivan Ivanovitch dashed to the door, pushed it open, and flung himself into the next room. Father Vikenty followed him, bewildered, still not understanding what

had caused this sudden flight. But when he reached the threshold, cold, heart-twisting horror rooted him to the spot.

He saw Dragoon lying on his mattress, sharp tremors running down his body and legs; not convulsions but the last feeble shudders of death (perhaps he had lain there all the time, perhaps he had never moved, clinging to that mattress as to the last link with life yet accepting the fear, the agony of the inevitable with an instinctive sense of relief). Already Dragoon's eyes, pushed almost out of their sockets by asphyxiation, were half glazed; and his tongue hung out of his mouth, swollen and blue.

It was the sight of Ivan Ivanovitch fumbling at the other door, unable in his terror to find the doorknob, that brought on the rage — the unreasoning, ungovernable rage of a wounded bear, the rage to kill, to annihilate, to destroy. In one bound Father Vikenty was upon him, dragging him back by the scruff of his neck. Ivan Ivanovitch screamed, but he clamped his hand on his mouth and sent him spinning across the room, so that the little man crumpled against the wall between the bed and the desk. Panting, not with exertion but with the fury that was lashing within him, Father Vikenty seized a chair and swung it above his head. He looked terrible at that moment, with his lips drawn back and his teeth bared. And a whine escaped the little man, then a shriek: "You — You killed that dog, not I!"

No dart, no arrow piercing the heart could have arrested Father Vikenty as completely as did the truth which lay buried in those words. And Ivan Ivanovitch, driven by instinct rather than cunning, kept shouting, "You are mad! You are demented! I wanted to save you. I gave him cyanide. But it's you who made me give it to him with your lies!"

The chair came crashing to the floor. With a moan Father Vikenty reeled around, his head between his hands, and stared down at Dragoon. Then slowly his knees bent under him and he knelt beside the body of his dog.

Had there been a flicker of life left in Dragoon, had he tried with his last breath to lick Father Vikenty's hand — which undoubtedly he would have done — Father Vikenty's pent-up agony might have spent itself in sobs and tears. But Dragoon was dead.

And in his grief, in his despair, Father Vikenty felt nothing but an insuperable longing to console him: "Don't be afraid, Dragoonushka — Don't be afraid — You are God's child, Dragoonushka, don't be afraid — " He picked up the limp body and carried it across the room. "Sleep where you liked to sleep, Dragoonushka — Yes, sleep here to your heart's content — "

And very gently he laid Dragoon down on the bed, saying, "Give him rest, O Lord, in a place of brightness, a place of verdure, a place of repose, whence all sickness, sorrow and sighing have fled away."

10

SUNDAY turned out unusually clear and warm for early March. One of those mornings in late winter when spring lurked in the air, and everything seemed newly washed and renovated; and the sun shone, and sparrows chirruped, and pigeons cooed, and even the ash cans in the streets looked festive, somehow. In short, a bright smile of a morning, in which death had no place.

Yet death lay behind Father Vikenty, in his room, still stretched out on the bed, covered now by a white sheet; and death, or rather news of death, lay ahead of him. For no sooner had he entered the church, than there was a rush of feet, and Madame Pishnik and Miss Katastrofoff precipitated themselves upon him: "Have you heard? Have you heard? Stalin is dead!"

They cried out the news as though they were exclaiming, Christ is risen; as though a new and better world had budded overnight. But Father Vikenty could only stare at them in surprise, his eyes rimmed with red by an all-night vigil. And Madame Pishnik exclaimed, "Where have you been, Batiushka? The news came through on Friday and it was confirmed yesterday, and again today in the Sunday papers. Some say he was poisoned."

The reddening of her cheeks, her heaving breasts, the backward slide of her purple toque, all bespoke of new hopes; while Miss Katastrofoff said with a touch of loathing, in which her natural hesitancy found sudden conciseness, "To a dog a dog's death!"

Father Vikenty looked down at the floor. Miss Katastrofoff's words had offended him (in his grief it seemed to him that his whole parish must have heard by now of Dragoon's death). Stalin might be dead in the Kremlin, poisoned by his slaves, and a faithful innocent dog might be lying dead in a room in New York,

poisoned by his own master's folly, but never could there be a twining of the two. And with a stiff little bow he left the women.

In the cloakroom he put on his black cassock, then crossed the church in the direction of the altar. And stationing himself in front of the closed gates of the iconostasis, he performed three deep reverences and began to murmur in a low voice the secret opening prayers of the Divine Liturgy.

The two women, meanwhile, ignorant of Dragoon's tragic fate, glanced at one another, then quickly looked away, frightened by the suspicions which they had all too clearly read in each other's eyes. What could this silence, this indifference on the part of Father Vikenty signify? And whence that haggard look, that lifeless stare? Was it true, then, what Ivan Ivanovitch had said? Was their priest slowly going out of his mind? Full of misgivings, of sad forebodings, they took up their respective posts — Madame Pishnik in the choir, Miss Katastrofoff near the desk, ready to assist Miss Klüpfel, if necessary. For already the church was filling with worshipers, and candles were being bought, and candles were being lit in front of favorite icons.

About one thing however they had been mistaken, those two devoted members of Father Vikenty's Triumvirate — there was no indifference in his heart as he finished the preliminary prayers and went into the inner sanctuary. The realization that Stalin lay dead in the Kremlin had gradually sunk into his consciousness, saturating every cell of his brain with the same thought: before his Creator this man must appear, who had known no pity, no compassion, no forgiveness. And in that instant he relinquished Dragoon, his grief lost in the horror that had shaken his soul — to think, to think that such a formidable sinner must yet appear before his Creator!

He stood, clothed now in his sacerdotal vestments, near the table of oblations, washing his hands before preparing the holy things for Communion. And while words of the prescribed prayer fell from his lips, his concomitant thoughts gathered around the dead man in the Kremlin:

"Destroy not my soul with the ungodly, nor my life with the men of blood, in whose hands is iniquity, and their right hand is

full of gifts — " And this man, who now lay dead, was he to face destruction? He had been ungodly and a man of blood, and his right hand had been full of gifts; all manner of gifts but one — the priceless gift of life itself: that he had been free to take but powerless to bestow. And goaded perhaps by this ultimate impotency, he had cold-bloodedly, deliberately set himself to destroy not only human lives but also that which alone could have withstood his lust for power: the freedom of man's conscience and the dignity of man. And he had preached the gospel of brotherly betrayal, striking down the unwilling and the recalcitrant, so that in the end all those who had been strong and creative in his realm had cringed at his feet in an exaltation of profane hallelujahs, calling to him as to the one and only god of wisdom. And now this man, who had exacted all these things, must needs face his Creator!

Father Vikenty shuddered. It was as if he were made to carry the unbearable weight of the dead man's sins. For was there any single sin committed in this world in which the rest of mankind did not share responsibility, just as redemption and salvation were offered to all? The thought was staggering. Father Vikenty felt himself unworthy of such a burden. He tried to concentrate on the holy service he was conducting, yet again some stray words of a prayer brought him back to the dead man of the Kremlin:

"Order our lives in peace, O Lord; have mercy upon us, and upon the world — " But could there be mercy for one who had known not what mercy meant? And if it be true that his slaves had brought about his end in violence, then, like Pandora's box, his death might spill the human ills that were within him, spreading decay of the spirit in all four corners of the earth.

"O God of spirits, and of flesh, who has trampled down death, and overthrown the Devil, and given life unto thy world: Do thou the same, Lord, give rest to the soul of thy servant Joseph — " But try as he might, he could not bring himself to whisper, "In a place of brightness, a place of verdure, a place of repose, whence all sickness, sorrow and sighing have fled away." The words, which had poured forth so freely and with such ease over the dead body of Dragoon, now stuck in his throat. And secretly he wept over

his unforgivingness. For hadn't he, here in the innermost sanctuary of his church, set himself up as judge over this man?

He remembered the multitude of times he had said to others, "You have judged, and that is a great sin"; and now he had done the same, here, at God's own altar, he had been tested and had failed. So overwrought was he by this revelation of his own vindictiveness that he fell silent in the middle of a prayer which he had been intoning, and light coughs of discomfort came from the members of the choir as they waited to sing the response; and again a few minutes later he left out a number of words in another prayer, and the choir burst into a loud peal to drown his error. No doubt there were those among the congregation — to wit Ivan Ivanovitch — who would report these mistakes and omissions to Archbishop Sofrony, but he wasn't thinking of that. He was too overcome by his own unworthiness, too crushed by the still clinging, growing thought of what lay in store for the dead man: and it wasn't of Hell that he was thinking but of the self-annihilating shudder of a lost soul standing in the presence of its Creator. He longed to pray, to beg that some of this horror be diverted his way. Like a lightning rod let me stand beside him, he wanted to cry, but prayers and supplications lay dormant, and nothing but the same repetitive words kept drumming through his brain: This man this man this man must yet appear before his Creator, yes this man this man this man must yet appear —

But when the time came to open the big gates, and he faced the people, some of them standing and some kneeling according to their wont, a breath of calm descended upon him, and a new discernment seemed to shed its light from within: Of course! How could he have been so blind? How could he have presumed to stand alone as a lightning conductor? "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst." And here they were, two and three and more, and together they should pray; yes, He was in their midst — "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and for ever" — ready to take their petition and raise it to Heaven, ready by means of this unselfish ecumenical prayer to open up their hearts and to still all irritation and animosity.

At a glance Father Vikenty took them all in. There to his left

stood Natasha, crossing herself; and behind her Professor and Mrs. Bourkevitch; and a little further on, Colonel Koudrov, the Professor's arch-enemy; and further still Karp, and many, many others; and in front of the altar steps Terenteeva, on her knees, her forehead pressed to the floor, repenting perhaps over her unrepentance; and beyond her Mr. Owtch, his eyes hopefully raised to where his paint reflected a ray of sunshine; and to the right the Tverskoys; and again many others — all of them faces familiar of old. And far away at the back of the church, near the entrance, looking self-conscious and a little ill at ease, stood Boukashov. Strange that he should have come this Sunday of all Sundays. Perhaps the news of Stalin's death had drawn him here in an instinctive desire to pray for the remission of sins and the cleansing of souls. And it was only right and proper that he should be here today to join in this great prayer of reconciliation.

The thought sustained Father Vikenty throughout the remainder of the long service, yet that inner trepidation never left him; instead it seemed to grow:

"This man this man this man must yet appear before his Creator, yes this man, this man this man —"

And now it was almost like a race — the petition must be lodged before the final judgment had been passed, yet not a single word of the Divine Liturgy could be curtailed. The intensity of it reverberated through every fiber of his being, so that when at long last the time came to give the final benediction, he went forward, the big silver-gilt cross in his hand, and stopped at the edge of the altar steps, his eyes dimmed by tears, a treacherous lump creating havoc in his throat.

He didn't notice the bored looks which appeared on many faces in anticipation of a sermon; for Father Vikenty's sermons, few and far apart, had never been particularly edifying, often giving rise by the primitiveness and clumsiness of his similes to secret smiles and jokes among his parishioners. And so the people, unsuspecting, waited in their boredom for what was to come.

Ten seconds, twenty seconds went by; a profound silence enveloped the church, and yet Father Vikenty stood there, not collecting but rather rejecting his thoughts. For how could he ever ex-

press that which he had so painfully, so poignantly lived through in the last hour and a half?

"This man this man this man must yet appear before his Creator — "

He looked down at his congregation. These people, these worshipers, so many of whom were more intelligent, more educated, more enlightened than he was, surely they must have thought and felt the same thing with far greater articulateness and clarity. All they needed now was a signal from their pastor to let the great prayer flow freely from their hearts. And with one last swallow he said, "Brothers and sisters, let us pray for Stalin."

He didn't look at anyone this time. He turned to the altar, exclaiming, "O Lord, have mercy on the soul of thy servant, Joseph. Forgive him his transgression, for who among us is without sin and does not stand in hope of salvation?" And falling on his knees, he prostrated himself in front of the high altar, lost to the world in secret, ardent prayer.

He did not see the splintered glances that flew from eye to eye, nor did he hear the shuffling of feet, as the people, first one by one and then in groups of two and three and more, hurried to the front entrance. But Natasha saw it all. She saw them converging near the door — the majority in protest and anger, a few in fear of remaining behind and being later accused of approbation — and then flowing out into the sunshine. Ever her mother went out, following her father, doubtless prompted by the necessity to watch over his temper, rather than from any free choice of her own.

Natasha was the last to leave the church. She paused on the top of the steps and looked around. Near her, leaning against the side of the door, stood Madame Pishnik, tears streaming down her cheeks. Was she thinking of the many times Father Vikenty had said, "Here in this church it will happen, you just wait and see?" Natasha couldn't tell, nor was she able to give her whole attention to Madame Pishnik. Her eyes were darting all over the place. The wide sidewalk was crowded with people disgorged by the church; they stood in small compact groups, friend and foe united, all of them of one mind, vociferating. Loud Russian in-

dignation filled the air, so that passers-by shied and crossed to the other side of the street, and a policeman came strolling up to inspect this conclave with an amused smile. He caught Natasha's eye and winked.

But Natasha was in no mood to smile back. She was looking at her father and the Professor and Boukashov, standing together on the edge of the sidewalk, and at Terenteeva who was pouring out a torrent of words at her mother. She could hear her father exclaiming, "What insolence! How dare he force such a prayer on us?" And with these words he seemed to have expressed the general prevailing mood, for Natasha could hear similar remarks rising everywhere around her.

She heard the Professor exclaim, "How dare he assume that there can be any forgiveness for Stalin, that's what I'd like to know"; and Boukashov: "I agree with you, I agree entirely!" She heard her mother say, "After all Jesus Christ did tell us to love our enemies and bless those who persecuted us"; but her father turned around with a gesture of exasperation: "Your Christianity, Ducky, smacks of affectation"; and the Professor said, "All right! If we can bring ourselves to bless Stalin now that he's dead, let's bless him, but that doesn't mean God will forgive him"; and Boukashov said, "Quite out of the question!" And Terenteeva cried, "You are right, Princess, you are right, Jesus Christ did tell us that, but the Prince hit the nail on the head just now when he mentioned affectation. It was all affectation on the part of our poor Batiushka. He is a comedian at heart, I know him!"

Filled with sadness, Natasha withdrew her eyes and let them roam for a while. The crowd did not consist of groups only, there were fluid elements in it too — men hurrying here and there, exclaiming, talking, gesticulating. By far the swiftest among them was Karp. She could see him, his lean body jerking with the intensity and excitement of the moment, as he rushed from group to group, weaving a zigzag pattern through the crowd. She also saw the twitching face of Colonel Koudrov, first at a distance, then closer; then, to her surprise, the man of the pumpkin head stood beside the Professor, and instead of an exchange of insults the two men burst into a lively chatter, interrupting one another

in their newly found harmony and understanding:

"Well, how d'you like this — ?"

"How do *you* like it — ?"

"Strange, to say the least — "

"Outrageous — "

"Trying to make us forgive the Bolsheviks — "

"And taking advantage of us in church — "

"There are those in Washington — "

"There certainly are — "

" — who might be interested in this."

For just an instant harmony and understanding seemed to topple at a precarious angle, as the two men suddenly fell silent, eying one another with suspicion, each one afraid the other might get the credit for reporting this slur. But when the Prince said, "Aren't you a bit too hasty?" both Colonel and Professor turned on him as one man: "One can never be too hasty in such matters!" And Boukashov put in his word: "My advice to you is watch him. The clergy offers a wonderful shelter for subversives, if they once find their way into its ranks." And it was then, although subconsciously at the time, that Natasha cast Boukashov out of her life for good.

But the vituperations against Father Vikenty were taking a new and unexpected turn. Natasha's attention was forcibly drawn to the bottom of the steps, where another group was gathering momentum. At first Miss Katastrofoff and Mrs. Bourkevitch had stood there alone — Miss Katastrofoff sobbing, Mrs. Bourkevitch consoling her — but now Ivan Ivanovitch and Mr. Owtch joined them. And Miss Katastrofoff flung out both her hands, exclaiming, "What does all this mean, Ivan Ivanovitch, oh what does all this mean?" And Ivan Ivanovitch cried, "Father Vikenty has gone mad, that's what it means!" And Miss Katastrofoff moaned, "Oh no! Oh, can't you do something about it?" And he cried back, "I can! I will! Not only for his sake, but for yours!" And he pressed the spinster's hands to his heart, for in this wildest of moments the wildest of things seemed to be happening.

And now it was as though a horrible nightmare had been turned loose. Natasha saw her own foolish joke about Punty, her

own bit of mischievous impudence grow and spread, taking root and substance in front of her eyes with lightning rapidity. And the sadness which had been written on her face changed to something close to despair.

Miss Katastrofoff had exclaimed, "Don't tell me, oh don't tell me that our dear Batiushka has gone mad!"

And Ivan Ivanovitch cried out, "Of course he has! Didn't you hear him getting mixed up in the service? And then this outrage of a prayer! Would he have done it had he been sane? And last night his dog died, and he said prayers for the dead over him as though the dog were a human being. God only knows what he hasn't done with dogs! Why, my lord Sofrony said he even baptized one!"

"No — No — Impossible!" This jointly from Miss Katastrofoff and Mrs. Bourkevitch.

"If you don't believe me, ask Meester Owtch."

And Mr. Owtch said, tears of emotion glistening in his eyes, "Yes, yes, I heard it from His Eminence himself."

"So you see, he's mad, he's mad," Ivan Ivanovitch cried. "Meester Owtch and I are on our way to the monastery to report everything to my lord Sofrony, and my lord Sofrony will give him a chance to fast and pray. Come, Meester Owtch!"

But Karp, who had rushed up to them, slipped a detaining hand into Ivan Ivanovitch's arm. "Wait a minute! What was it you just said about dogs?"

"I said Father Vikenty has been baptizing them. Meester Owtch here has it straight from my lord Sofrony."

Karp's lips shaped themselves into a silent whistle of amazement, and his eyebrows flew into the air; so did those feral fingers of his, pointing straight at the little man's nose, not in fury and assault this time, but in a prolonged savoring of the scandal. And the two men gazed at one another for a moment, that which was most rapacious and vulnerable in them — Karp's fingers and Ivan Ivanovitch's lumpy nose — facing each other in complete reconciliation.

Then they broke apart, Ivan Ivanovitch running to Mr. Owtch's car, followed by Mr. Owtch himself, while Karp skipped up to the Professor's side and nudged him at the elbow.

"Have you heard the latest? Father Vikenty has been going about baptizing dogs!"

"What's this? What's this?"

Six pairs of incredulous eyes fixed themselves upon him.

"Yes, baptizing dogs! It's a fact. Archbishop Sofrony has accused him of it. Father Vikenty has gone mad!"

The Prince turned to the Princess, spreading his arms out in dismay; and the Princess, forgetting momentarily the incident in her house, or perhaps unable at the moment to connect the two events in her mind, murmured, "Well, if he went about baptizing dogs —"

The Professor and the Colonel exclaimed in unison, "I suspected as much." Boukashov tapped his forehead with his finger, while Terenteeva cried, "I've always said he was a comedian, but now I think perhaps he's a great comedian!"

And Karp hurried through the crowd, spreading the news. And one woman cried out, "Why, yes! I remember! He used to look strangely at my poodle!" And another exclaimed, "Yes, yes, of course! He always said my Poozic was an angel of a dog!" And everywhere Karp went he left a trail of voices behind him: "Oh God! Father Vikenty is a madman. He went about baptizing dogs!"

Natasha could stand it no longer. Actually, only a few minutes had elapsed since she had come out of the church, but it seemed like an hour of mad dreaming. She turned to where Madame Pishnik had been standing, anxious to tell her the truth about the blessing of the dogs, but Madame Pishnik had joined Miss Katastroffoff, and the two women were now sobbing on each other's shoulders.

Natasha glanced around in desperation. To shout the truth to these people was impossible. Besides, she herself felt all spent with grief and remorse. One thought alone stood uppermost in her mind now — to rush to Father Vikenty and beg his forgiveness.

After the bright sunshine the church looked very dark. All Natasha could see was the cluster of shimmering lights above the altar erected to the dead. She closed the door to shut out the frenzy, and a dead silence fell about her, broken only by a slight

rustling of dollar bills at the desk, behind which Miss Klüpfel, meticulous and diligent, was counting the revenues of the days as though nothing unusual had happened.

It took Natasha's eyes a second or two to get accustomed to the semi-darkness. Then she saw Father Vikenty. He was standing outside the open gates of the iconostasis, still in his vestments, still holding the silver-gilt cross in his hand. He looked so resigned, so patient, that at first she thought he was waiting for his congregation to return and receive the final benediction. But as she drew nearer, she saw that he, too, like Miss Klüpfel, was impervious to his surroundings, only in a very different way. He seemed to be looking into himself, his eyes half closed. Was he meditating over what had happened, or was he praying, or was it just his body standing there, while he himself touched other spheres? Natasha didn't know. Very gently she kissed the cross; then the hand that held it.

He came to with a slight start, and Natasha began to whisper, incoherently, passionately, "Forgive me, forgive me — It's all my fault, my fault — I'm a foolish, stupid creature who never thinks — Always impulses, only impulses — And now they are saying that you've gone mad, that you've been in the habit of baptizing dogs — "

She felt the touch of his hand upon her shoulder and heard him say, "Do not fret, Natasha dear, it's not your fault."

He didn't ask what was happening outside — he seemed to know. And her outraged voice cried out, "That dreadful Ivan Ivanovitch has gone to the monastery to complain about you!"

But again he said, "Do not fret, Natasha."

Was he in a state of shock, rendered senseless by the shattering of his dream? She glanced at his face, but it looked calm. And presently he said, "So Ivan Ivanovitch is on his way? That means the monastery for me, and meditation, and ovens — " His nostrils widened as though already the smell of baking bread had hit them. "Some day, Natasha, you will come and I will hand you a loaf — a nice fresh loaf of good black bread. But don't be too hard on Ivan Ivanovitch. I say, 'May he swiftly reach his destination.' Yes, from the very bottom of my heart I say it — "

He paused in mid-sentence; and Natasha pondered over his words, his musings, not fully comprehending what he meant. But then she saw his face light up as though from within. And his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak with a fluency he had never attained before; and Natasha, closing her eyes, heard and understood:

"Because we all live in kingdoms of our own, don't we? Locked up as in a tiny closet, and the key gets lost. Sometimes we thrash about, and then again we lie still, so very still, like a mouse in its hole, peering out at the world and saying, 'Please give me my cheese and keep the cat from my door.' For truly we are like mice, each one of us peering out of his little hole, a hole that yet becomes a kingdom. The kingdom of pride, the kingdom of possessiveness, the kingdom of indignation, the kingdom of the mote in your brother's eye. The kingdom of ambitions, and the kingdom of strivings, and the kingdom of success. The kingdom of self-abasement, and the kingdom of inertia, and the kingdom of buried talents. And the kingdom of kindly impulses. And the kingdom of worthy deeds. And the kingdom of the pursuit of happiness on earth. They are all of the earth, these many kingdoms, and their name is legion — for who could enumerate them and call them all by name? And because they are of the earth they must needs spring forth and bind us, imprisoning us within their walls as in a stronghold. Many of us know that we are trapped and bound, and many of us pray. Yet what is it we pray for most of the time but the strengthening of those same walls that hold us? I for one have done it in my kingdom of loneliness, with all its fiefs and feuds and vassalages. I thought I could be the one to point out the gate through which not I alone but many others would pass into freedom, into peace, into brotherly love. And so I prayed, and my prayers became like wishes, and I turned God into a wishing well. But now I will no longer peer out, nor hanker, nor make a wish. I will set my heart in search of the one and only kingdom: the kingdom for which He died on the cross, and through which He conquered death, and which, He said, was within us."

A faint tinkle of coins, a rattle of keys, and Miss Klüpfel closed

the desk with a loud snap. She stepped out from behind it, bowed to the altar, crossing herself devoutly, and went out. No one entered the church.

"Meet me outside, Natasha," he said, "and drive me to the monastery, but not too fast. We mustn't get there until Ivan Ivanovitch has had his say."